

Biggles

BURIES A HATCHET

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



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CHAPTER 1

A VISITOR BRINGS NEWS

THE six o'clock news was coming through on the radio when Biggles walked into the flat which he shared with his staff pilots to find them all there. Ginger, who was sitting nearest the instrument, seeing Biggles arrive, switched off.

'Hello,' he greeted, in a tone of mild surprise. 'You're back earlier than I expected.'

'Does it matter?' inquired Biggles casually, dropping into a chair.

'Not particularly. But you said you were staying at the office until the Air Commodore—'

'I know,' broke in Biggles. 'But he phoned to say he wouldn't be coming back, so as the matter about which I wanted to see him wasn't urgent I waffled along home. Has something happened?'

'Nothing much; but there was a phone call for you a few minutes ago. A fellow wanted to see you. I said you weren't expected back until around seven. He said he'd come round then.'

'You know I don't like seeing people here.'

'I told him that, but he said there were reasons why he didn't want to go to Scotland Yard.'

'Did he give his name?'

'Yes. Fritz Lowenhardt. Does that mean anything to you?'

'Not a thing — except that it has a solid German ring about it. We may know more about it presently. You might buzz the janitor and tell him to bring this fellow up when he arrives.'

Ginger obeyed. 'Do you want a cup o' tea?' he queried.

'No thanks. I had one on the way home.' Biggles unfolded the evening paper and settled back to read.

'How do you suppose this chap Lowenhardt got your private address?' asked Algy. 'He couldn't have got it from the phone book because it isn't there.'

'Obviously somebody must have given it to him. Does he speak English?'

'Perfectly, although his accent sounded a bit rough,' answered Ginger.

'From his voice I'd say he's a young man.'

'We shall see,' returned Biggles. Silence fell.

It was shortly after seven that the expected knock came on the door and the janitor showed in the visitor who, after the door had been closed, gazed around with what to Ginger seemed like anxiety, if not nervousness.

He had been right in his belief that the man who had made the phone call was young; actually, he was younger even than he had thought. He put his age at not more than eighteen. In the matter of appearance he was tall, straight and

fair, with exceptionally bright blue eyes. His features were finely cut, and with a rather pale complexion gave an impression that he was not very strong.

‘Sit down, Mr Lowenhardt,’ invited Biggles. ‘My name is Bigglesworth. I understand you want to see me.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You speak English?’

‘Not very well,’ was the answer, with a pronounced accent.

Biggles smiled. ‘Don’t worry about that. If you have any difficulty speak German. With one language or the other no doubt we shall be able to get along. Where have you come from?’

‘From Germany.’

‘East or West?’

‘From East Berlin.’

A shadow of disapproval crossed Biggles’ face. ‘What was your purpose in coming to see me?’

‘I came to deliver a message.’

‘From whom?’

‘From my uncle.’

Biggles looked puzzled. ‘Am I supposed to know him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who is your uncle?’

‘I express myself badly. I should have said my uncle is Hauptmann Erich von Stalhein.’

It was not often that Ginger saw the wind taken out of Biggles’ sails, as the saying is, but this was one such occasion.

After a brief pause in which he threw a comical expression at the others. Biggles went on: ‘What is this message?’

‘I am to tell you to be extra careful because there is a plot to assassinate you.’

Biggles stared at the speaker. Incredulity raised his voice a tone. ‘Your uncle has sent you here to tell me *that*?’

‘Yes. It has been ordered that you must be liquidated.’

‘Ordered by whom?’

‘The Special Committee of the Secret Police.’

‘But those are the very people for whom your uncle works.’ Suspicion and astonishment were mingled in Biggles’ declaration.

‘He did work for them, but not any more.’

‘I see. So it’s like that. Now tell me this. Why did your uncle send you with this message? If he felt like that about me why didn’t he come here himself?’

‘It was not possible.’

‘Why not?’

‘He has gone to prison.’

‘You amaze me. For how long?’

‘For life. Which means you will never see him again. It also means that he

will not live long. You know how these things are arranged in Eastern Europe, where men who are no longer any use to the Party are regarded both as a danger and an unnecessary expense.'

Bertie started to protest, but Biggles stopped him with a gesture. 'Do you know how this state of affairs came about?' he asked the German youth.

'Yes.'

'Then I think you had better tell us about it,' suggested Biggles, his eyes on the visitor's face. 'By the way, how old are you?'

'I am seventeen.'

'Do you live with your uncle?'

'I live with my mother, my uncle's younger sister. Since my father died Uncle Erich has often stayed with us. Indeed, he was with us when this blow fell.'

'Do you know who I am, and what I am?'

'Oh yes. My uncle spoke often of you to me. It is because of you that he is where he is now, but he bears you no ill-will for that.'

'Where is he?'

'In the political prison of Sakhalin, the island that lies off the coast of Siberia between the Gulf of Tartary and the Sea of Okhotsk. It is the most dreadful place in all the world. Life there is a living death.'

'Are you suggesting that it was through me that he has been sent there?'

'Yes.'

'How do you make that out?'

'You were the chief cause of his failure.'

'He would have been the cause of mine had things fallen out differently,' stated Biggles. 'If he chose to take sides with people on the other side of the Iron Curtain that was entirely his affair. He knew the sort of people he was working for. I can't accept responsibility for that. What were you doing in the Russian Zone of Berlin, anyway?'

'Please don't imagine that we like it there.'

'Then why do you stay?'

'It is easy to say that. Our home has always been there. To leave, even if that could be arranged, would mean abandoning everything we possess, all the things we treasure, and arriving in Western Europe with nothing but the clothes we stand in. We often talked of doing that, but my mother is getting on in years and she could not bear to part with the things she shared with my father.'

'I can understand that,' conceded Biggles.

'People who live in a free country cannot imagine what life is like for us.'

'Some of us have a pretty good idea,' said Biggles. 'But returning to your uncle, would you expect me to shed tears over the fate of a man who has always been the enemy of my country?'

'You have always been the enemy of his.'

'That's not true. While we were at war, yes, but even then there was

nothing personal about it. When the war was over — well, it was over and we were prepared to bury the hatchet. But not your uncle. He had allowed his hatred of us to eat into him so far that he could think of nothing else than how to injure us.’

‘Not so much, lately.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘I don’t know about that. But let us not waste time arguing about it. Tell me about this latest development.’

‘Very well. For some time my uncle had been aware that, because of his failures, he had ceased to have the confidence of his superiors. All this really culminated in his failure to recover the papers which Hitler’s Intelligence Officer, Wolff, took with him to Jamaica, where he posed as a Norwegian under the name of Hagen.’¹

‘He told you about that?’

‘Yes. When he returned home he was severely reprimanded. Then someone going through the records observed that he had failed several times, and always through the same cause.’

‘What cause?’

‘You.’

‘Go on.’

‘The conclusion was reached that he was playing a double game, and that he was passing information to you.’

‘Ha! That’s a good one!’ snorted Bertie.

The visitor ignored the interruption. ‘He was arrested and charged with treason. He could have escaped because he had been warned of what was going to happen. He still had one or two friends in high places. The night before they came for him, when he was at our house, one rang him up and told him he just had time to get out of the country. But he refused to run away. He said he would face the charge, although the result was a foregone conclusion. He was tried by the People’s Court and found guilty, but before sentence was passed he was secretly given an opportunity to redeem himself. It had been decided to put you out of the way, so he was ordered to go to England and kill you as proof of his integrity. He refused, saying he was a soldier, not a murderer. He was given twenty-four hours to reconsider the matter. He came to our house and giving me some money, and your address, told me to go to England to warn you of what was likely to happen.’

‘I’m surprised they allowed you to leave.’

‘I couldn’t bring any luggage, of course. I came exactly as I was. I went out as if I was going for a walk, slipped into the station and took the first train out. How I got across the frontier is another story.’

‘Did your mother approve of this?’

‘She raised no objection.’

‘Are you sure you weren’t followed?’

‘I don’t know. In my miserable country one never knows if one is being watched.’

‘Won’t you be missed?’

‘Possibly.’

‘And now, having discharged your mission here, how are you going to get back into East Berlin?’

‘I don’t know that, either, but I shall find a way when the time comes.’

‘Wasn’t this decision to kill me rather sudden? I mean, your uncle’s superior officers must for a long time have known of my activities as a counter-espionage agent.’

‘My uncle had a feeling that something was in the wind, a new anti-western plot of some sort, and that was why his superiors thought it would be better if you were where you couldn’t cause trouble. That, it seems, also applied to him. Perhaps he knew too much, and that was why it was decided to put him away.’

‘Well, I’m much obliged to you for this information,’ said Biggles earnestly. ‘At the same time I’d like to say how sorry I am to hear this tragic news about your uncle. It’s all a great pity. More than once, not necessarily because I was hoping to get him on our side of the fence, I warned him of what his fate would be if he persisted in co-operating with the ruthless gang that now controls half your country.’

‘He was a stubborn man, also a proud one.’

‘Are you telling us?’ breathed Algy.

Again Biggles studied the face of the visitor. ‘Were you very fond of your uncle?’

‘Yes. He was always kind to me and my mother. I admired him, too, because I knew he was a brave soldier.’

‘Tell me this, frankly,’ requested Biggles, curiously. ‘Had you any other motive in coming to see me, apart from warning me of my danger?’

The boy hesitated.

‘Speak up. You’re safe here.’

‘I thought you might be able to help him.’

Biggles looked puzzled. ‘What do you mean? Help who?’

‘My uncle.’

‘In what way?’

‘Knowing of your efficiency, which he admired and which has now been the cause of his downfall, I thought — you might — be able...’

‘To do what?’

‘Do something for him.’

‘What could I, of all people, do for him?’

‘You could help him to escape.’

Biggles sat back, staring. ‘Are you serious?’

‘I was never more serious.’

‘Have you forgotten that your uncle was an avowed enemy of my country?’

‘No.’

‘Yet you can sit there and calmly suggest that I risk branding myself as a traitor, even if I didn’t lose my life, by putting your uncle in a position from which he could carry on his private war against Britain!’

‘He wouldn’t do that.’

‘How do I know he wouldn’t?’

‘His outlook has changed very much recently, partly from his contact with you and partly from his eyes being opened by what he saw in Hungary during the recent uprising there. It may be that the Secret Police suspected this change in him. By saving him now you would be striking a blow at your real enemies.’

‘I’m not convinced of that,’ said Biggles, dubiously.

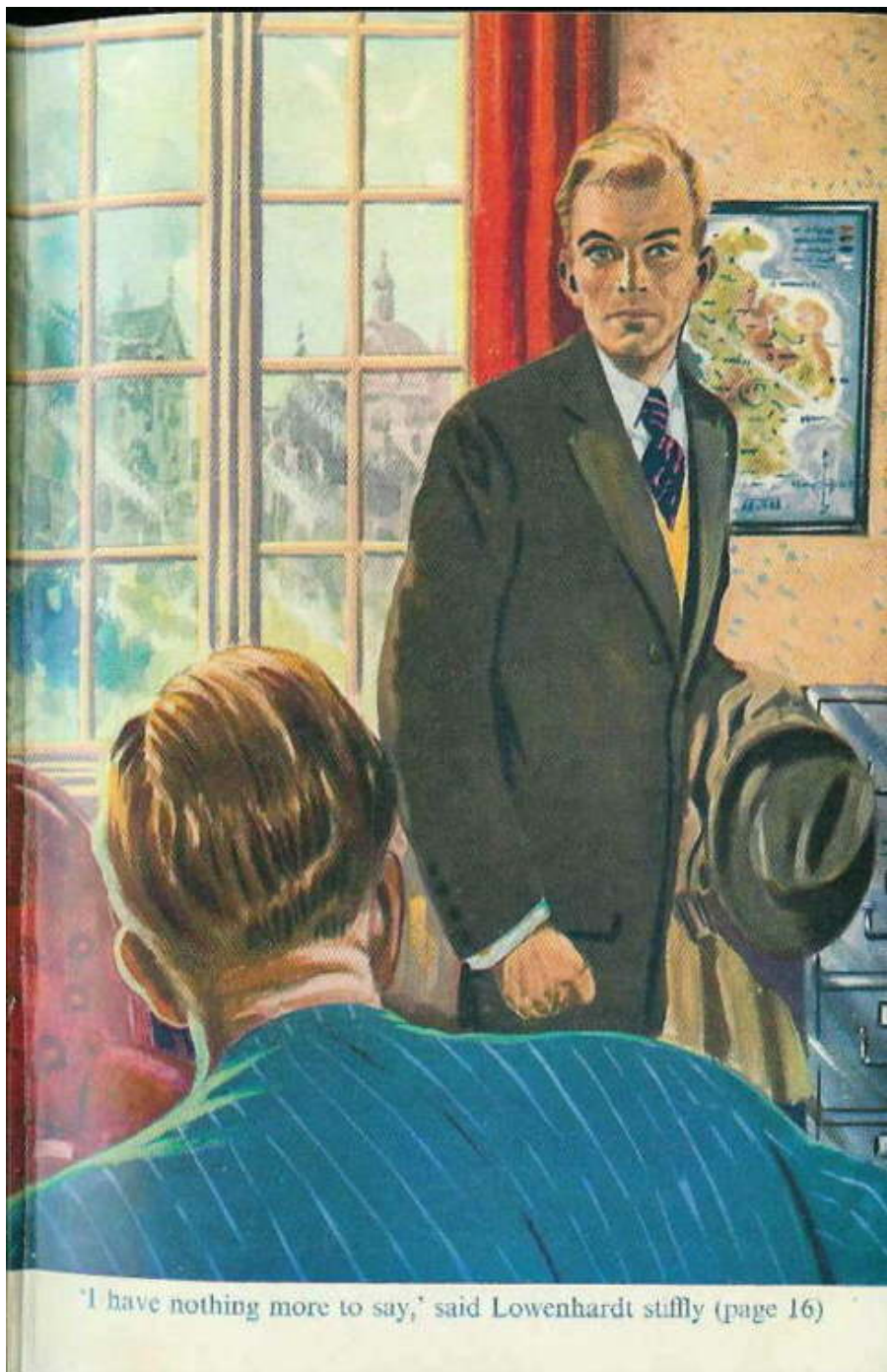
‘He could give you information which your Intelligence Service would be glad to have.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘Neither does that argument impress me. In any case, I am not a free agent to strike blows at anyone, whether it be for personal or national reasons. Some people would say that from our point of view your uncle is safer where he is.’

‘But for the warning he has sent you through me, you could have lost your life.’

‘I may lose it, anyway. Aside from anything else, how do you suppose I could get to Sakhalin? No. I’m sorry, Herr Lowenhardt, but there is nothing I can do. Your uncle chose to go his own way, and if it has landed him in a tangle of barbed wire he has only himself to thank. Besides, bearing in mind where you have come from, how do I know you are telling the truth? Indeed, how do I know this is not a trap to bring about the very thing against which, you say, you have come here to warn me?’

Fritz Lowenhardt stood up and drew himself erect. His face was slightly flushed. ‘If you think that, Major Bigglesworth, I have nothing more to say,’ he said stiffly.



"I have nothing more to say," said Lowenhardt stiffly (page 16)

'I don't necessarily think that, Herr Lowenhardt, but I would be both blind and foolish, would I not, if I failed to see the possibilities?'

'I understand.'

'I'm glad you do. Can I offer you some refreshment?'

‘No, thank you. I have done what I came to do. Now, if you don’t mind, I will take my leave.’

‘As you wish,’ agreed Biggles. ‘May I ask where you are staying in London, in case I have occasion to get in touch with you.’

‘I have a room at the Brimsdale Hotel, near Victoria Station.’

‘Thank you.’ Biggles turned to Ginger. ‘You might see Mr Lowenhardt out.’

‘Certainly.’

Ginger saw the young German to the front door and returned to find Algy airing his opinion of the proposal made by their caller.

‘For sheer cool nerve that would be hard to beat,’ he declared.

‘On the face of it I’m bound to agree,’ replied Biggles. ‘But taking all the circumstances into consideration it wasn’t an unnatural request. The boy’s desperate, and was prompted, no doubt, by the fact that he had taken a risk in coming here to tip me off about the attempt that will presumably be made on my life.’

‘Yes. What about that?’ exclaimed Bertie.

Biggles smiled. ‘Well, what about it?’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I shall have to take my luck. It wouldn’t be the first time. I’d look silly asking for police protection, wouldn’t I?’ Biggles lit a cigarette and resumed his chair.

‘I think you were a bit casual with him,’ said Ginger.

‘Oh, you do. Did you expect me to leap to my feet and tear off to Sakhalin?’

‘No, but I thought you might have been a little more sympathetic. May I take it that you have no intention of doing anything about this?’

‘You may,’ answered Biggles, firmly. ‘The best thing we can do is forget about it.’

‘But look here, old boy, you can’t just ignore this threat against your life,’ protested Bertie.

‘I shall not ignore it, you may be sure, but if such an attempt is on the boards, what can I do to prevent it? Would you have me bolt into hiding, or take to wearing a bulletproof waistcoat like a nervous dictator? Forget it. I shall keep my eyes skinned and keep out of dark corners. That’s all.’

‘What do you know about this place — what is it — Sakhalin, where they’ve dumped poor old Erich?’ asked Bertie. ‘I never was any bally good at geography.’

Biggles answered. ‘Speaking from memory all I can tell you about it is, it lies to the north of Japan; the southern tip is quite close, almost an extension, you might say, of Japan’s north island. It belongs to Russia, and in Tzarist days was a penal colony with a grim reputation. What goes on there now I don’t know, although from what that lad has just told us it sounds as if the new rulers of the Soviet Union are carrying on from where the Tzar left off,

with political prisoners thrown in. There might be some more information in the encyclopaedia. Look it up. Ginger.'

Ginger went to the bookcase and pulling out the appropriate volume flipped over the pages until he found what he sought.

'Sakhalin,' he read aloud. 'An island six hundred miles long and from sixteen to a hundred and twenty-five miles wide separated from the Siberian mainland by the Gulf of Tartary, which varies from twenty to eighty miles across. Two ranges of mountains up to five thousand feet high run the full length of the island from north to south. Sakhalin is almost entirely covered with fir and larch forest, in which live elk, bears, wolves, and other animals which cross over from the mainland when the Tartar Passage is frozen in winter. The climate is cold and sunless. A number of tribes live in primitive conditions by hunting and fishing. Their staple food is dried fish. Large crabs are dried and ground to flour to make a form of bread. The island is now being developed, oil, coal and some other minerals being produced. The chief towns are Due and Alexandrovsk.' Ginger closed the book and looked up. 'That's all.'

Biggles nodded slowly. 'So that's where they've sent von Stalhein. What a place to end up. He was no friend of ours, but I couldn't wish my worst enemy a fate like that.'

'I suppose young Lowenhardt was telling the truth... I mean, his tale wasn't a trap to get you where some people would like to see you?' suggested Bertie.

'He was telling the truth, all right,' answered Biggles. 'A boy of that age couldn't fool me. Besides, what was the purpose of spinning such a yarn when not by the widest stretch of imagination could I, of all people, be expected to attempt the impossible in an effort to help a man who has always been an implacable enemy? That wouldn't make sense.' Biggles reached for a cigarette and went on. 'Had von Stalhein been allowed to have his way he would have won the first round on the first occasion that we bumped into each other, and that was a long time ago. Algy could tell you all about it.'

'You tell us,' suggested Ginger.

'There isn't much to tell,' answered Biggles. 'A German agent in London mistook me for someone else and offered me an assignment.² I reported the matter to Intelligence, at the Air Ministry, and they ordered me to accept. That led to the stickiest job I've ever had, and was really responsible for what I've been doing on and off ever since. To make a long story short I found myself playing the double-spy on the German aerodrome at Zabala, in the Middle East. The station commander was a doddering old fool named Count von Faubourg. Von Stalhein, a regular army officer, who was limping about on two sticks, having been wounded in the leg, was his Chief of Staff Intelligence. He knew I was a phoney, but there was nothing he could do about it because he was under von Faubourg, who believed in me. At least, he demanded evidence before he'd act, and somehow I always managed, often by the skin of my teeth, to prevent von Stalhein from getting it. It was touch

and go, cut and thrust, all the time, and he must since have regretted many times that he didn't do what he should have done, which was to fake the evidence to have me shot, as — let us admit it — I deserved.'

'That he didn't must have been due to a weakness in him somewhere,' put in Ginger.

'Yes, I think you may have hit on something there,' agreed Biggles. 'His weakness, if we can call it that, lay in the fact that he was what he was — a Prussian professional soldier of the old school, a rigid disciplinarian and a gentleman in the sense that by upbringing and training he had a certain code of behaviour from which he was unable to break away. Actually, I suspect that has been his trouble all along. As a monarchist born and bred he had no business on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and in his heart knew it. Like a square peg in a round hole he just didn't fit, which was why it was inevitable that sooner or later he would fall foul of the people for whom he has been working. They aren't handicapped by scruples. He is, and always has been. I knew that. I told him so more than once. Well, there it is. It's a queer thought that after all these years we shan't be seeing him again. It'll be interesting to see who replaces him. But as I said just now, let's forget it.'

¹ See *Biggles in the Blue*.

² See *Biggles Flies East*.

CHAPTER 2

A MURDERER STRIKES TWICE

BEFORE doing anything else the following morning Biggles went to the office of his chief, Air Commodore Raymond, to report the information that had reached him overnight in so strange a manner.

‘I could have told you that,’ said the Air Commodore, pushing forward the cigarette box.

‘Do you mean you knew there was a plot to bump me off?’ demanded Biggles, indignantly.

‘No, I knew nothing about that,’ corrected the Air Commodore. ‘But I knew that von Stalhein had been sacked and sent to prison.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me? You knew I’d be interested.’

‘The information was only handed to me last night as a top secret. Actually, it was this piece of news, which came of course through one of our secret agents in the country, that prevented me from returning to the office last night. I would have told you this morning, but as it happens you have beaten me to it.’

‘Do you know where von Stalhein has been sent?’

‘No. We may learn that in due course.’

‘I can tell you.’

The Air Commodore’s eyebrows went up. ‘Where is he?’

‘Sakhalin.’

‘Oh dear. How dreadful. It looks as if he’s had it. No one gets away from there. Pity.’

‘What’s a pity?’

‘That he’s been sent so far away.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘Had he been in a more accessible place we might have made contact with him through our agents. He must be a mine of information, and after the treatment he’s received he might be prepared to sell some to us.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Every man has his price.’

Biggles frowned. ‘By thunder! That’s a cold-blooded way of looking at it. I doubt if it would work with von Stalhein, anyway. He’s actuated by motives harder even than hard cash.’

The Air Commodore sat back in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together. ‘My dear Bigglesworth, it’s time you knew that nothing on earth has colder blood than those who serve in what is sometimes called the Sinister Service. Counter-espionage, to give it its nicer name, must by its very nature be like that. But you don’t need me to tell you. Who brought this information?’

‘A young German named Lowenhardt. Von Stalhein’s nephew, as a matter of fact.’

The Air Commodore sat erect. ‘Did you say Lowenhardt?’

‘I did. Fritz Lowenhardt.’

‘Have you seen the morning papers?’

‘No. I haven’t yet had time to look at them.’

‘Then apparently you don’t know that a man named Lowenhardt was found stabbed last night.’

‘Dead?’

‘No, but he may die.’

‘Where did this happen?’

‘Near Victoria. I wonder could it be the same man, or is this coincidence?’

‘What age was the man found stabbed?’

‘I don’t know the details. I’ll get Inspector Gaskin up. He’ll know all there is to know because he has the case in hand.’

The Air Commodore reached for the intercom telephone and requested the presence of the detective in his office. Presently he came, dressed as usual in plain clothes.

‘This man Lowenhardt who was found stabbed last night,’ began the Air Commodore, without preamble. ‘What sort of age was he?’

‘Seventeen or eighteen.’

‘How did you learn his name?’

‘From some letters in his pocket. Christian name Fritz.’

‘How is he?’ put in Biggles.

‘He’s in a bad way, but the doctors think he has a chance. He’s still unconscious, but I have a couple of men sitting by him to take a statement when he comes round. He’d just been given a blood transfusion the last time I rang up.’

‘What’s his chief trouble?’

‘The knife wound, although he has concussion. It looks as if he was coshed from behind and then had a knife run between his shoulder blades. Whoever did the job meant to finish him. He was lucky. A woman came out of her house just in time to see it happen. She screamed. That brought along the officer on point duty at the next corner, although, of course, by the time he got there the assailant had bolted.’

‘Could this woman give a description of him?’

‘No. It was dark between the lamp posts and she only saw his back as he ran away. All she can say is he looked a powerfully built man of middle age.’

‘Have you found out where Lowenhardt was living in London?’ asked Biggles.

‘No. I reckon we shan’t know that till he comes round,’ answered Gaskin, taking his pipe from his pocket.

‘As it happens I can tell you,’ went on Biggles. ‘He was staying at the Brimsdale Hotel.’

Gaskin stopped in the act of filling his pipe. 'How the deuce do you know that?'

'He came to see me last night and must have been attacked on his way back to the hotel.'

Gaskin's eyes opened wide. 'What did he want to see you about? Don't say you come into this.'

'I do, very much so,' stated Biggles, smiling faintly at the detective's expression. 'Briefly, this lad Lowenhardt had come from East Berlin to warn me that certain gentlemen on the other side of the Iron Curtain had decided it was time I was put out of business. I'd never seen Lowenhardt before; in fact, I didn't know he existed. But I know his uncle. It was he who sent the message.'

'Looks as if Lowenhardt was tailed,' grunted Gaskin.

'Or was missed, and it was discovered where he'd gone. Agents in London would be waiting for him when he landed.'

The Air Commodore stepped in again. 'This is a political job, Gaskin. You'd better give this lad police protection in case an attempt is made to finish him off. With nothing to go on I don't expect you'll find the man who stabbed him. As the attack came from behind it's unlikely that the victim will be able to help you with a description.'

Gaskin looked at Biggles. 'What about you?'

'What about me?'

'You may be the next to get a skewer in your back. Have you got a gun in your pocket?'

'I don't normally carry hardware in my pocket in London. Anyway, a gun isn't much use against a thug who stabs from behind.'

Gaskin nodded. 'Mebbe you're right, at that. I'd better go along to the Brimsdale to see if there's anything there to give us a line.'

'I'll come with you,' decided Biggles.

'Be careful what you do,' the Air Commodore told Biggles, as he and Gaskin left the room.

In the corridor outside Biggles told the detective: 'I'll just slip along to my office to give my boys the gen. I'll see you at the door.'

In five minutes a police car was on its way to the Brimsdale Hotel. On arrival Gaskin identified himself to the manager, told him that his guest had met with an accident and asked to be taken to his room. This was done, the manager unlocking the door with a master-key.

As they walked in the detective's eyes made a comprehensive survey. A brand new suit of pyjamas lay on the bed and there were some toilet things, also new, over the wash basin. There was nothing else.

'Didn't he bring any luggage?' Gaskin asked the manager.

'No. He told me he had lost his suitcase on the way to London. For obvious reasons we don't like people without luggage, but he paid for two nights in advance, so I let him have the room.'

‘I see. All right. You can leave us alone now. We shan’t be long.’

After the manager had left the room the Inspector turned to Biggles. ‘Did Lowenhardt tell you he’d come straight here from Berlin?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did he manage that?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Where’s his passport ? It wasn’t on him. It isn’t here. The man who knocked him down couldn’t have had time to go through his pockets, with the woman who saw it happen yelling murder.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘It looks as if he managed to get here without one.’

‘That’s what I mean,’ growled Gaskin. ‘How did he manage that?’

‘I’ll ask him when he comes round,’ said Biggles. ‘He’ll tell me.’

‘Looks like a case of illegal entry.’

‘Could be,’ agreed Biggles. ‘It would be understandable, bearing in mind he lives in the Soviet Zone. Had he applied for a passport, not only would it have been refused, but he would have come under suspicion. That would mean he’d be watched, in which case he’d never have got away. He told me he came on the spur of the moment and he didn’t dare to be seen carrying luggage. He must have bought these pyjamas and things when he got here.’

‘That still doesn’t explain how he got through Customs. I gather you believed his tale?’

‘I did.’

‘Sounds a bit woolly to me.’

‘What he came here to tell me, or one of the things, that his uncle has gone to prison for working for the West, has been confirmed by our own agents. The Air Commodore told me that this morning.’

‘Well, there’s nothing more we can do here,’ returned the Inspector, making a final survey of the room. ‘I suppose you now have a personal interest in this business?’

‘I most certainly have.’

‘Then in that case I suggest we slip round to the hospital to see how he’s getting on.’

‘Where is he?’

‘In a private ward at St George’s.’

‘Okay. Let’s go. As he came to London for my benefit the least I can do is take care of him while he’s here.’

They drove round to the hospital where they learned from the Sister on duty that the man in whom they were interested had recovered consciousness but was still too weak to make a statement. They could speak to him but were not to stay long. Gaskin’s men were still sitting beside the bed.

They were taken to the patient. As was to be expected he looked terribly ill. Yet, curiously, he was the first to speak. His eyes found Biggles’ face and he said: ‘Now do you believe me?’

‘I never said I disbelieved you,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’m not going to worry

you now, but can you tell me this? How did you get here without a passport?’

‘A friend, a pilot on the regular air line, gave me a lift. My uncle arranged it.’

‘You didn’t tell me that.’

‘I did not think it was important.’

‘How did he get you through Customs?’

‘He lent me a spare pilot’s uniform. I had no luggage.’

Biggles smiled understandingly. ‘I see. Would you like me to try to make contact with your mother, to tell her what has happened?’

‘No, thank you. Please don’t do that. It would upset her. Besides, it would be dangerous.’

‘As you wish. That’s all for now. You’re under police protection so you have nothing to worry about. All you have to do is get well. I’ll see you again when you’re better.’

Biggles and Gaskin left the room and returned to Scotland Yard, where the Inspector went to his own office and Biggles to the Air Commodore.

‘Well?’ queried Raymond.

‘We found nothing in Lowenhardt’s room. He’s conscious, and seems to have a fair chance of pulling through.’

‘What are you going to do about all this?’

‘Me? Apart from keeping an eye on him while he’s here what else can I do?’

‘Not much, I suppose. You’ll do what you can for him?’

‘Of course.’

Biggles went on to his own office and gave what news there was to the others.

‘The dirty dogs, stabbing a kid like that in the back!’ muttered Bertie. ‘Pity we can’t catch the skunk who did it.’

‘Not much hope of that, I’m afraid,’ said Biggles ruefully

‘Are you going to do anything about this?’ asked Algy.

‘All we can do is wait for Lowenhardt to get better and hear what he has to say about it,’ returned Biggles. ‘Gaskin has the case in hand. He’ll keep an eye on him.’

‘Didn’t you ask him to keep an eye on you, too?’

‘Gaskin has plenty to do without playing nursemaid to me,’ returned Biggles, shortly.

For the next few days there were no further developments. Work went on in Biggles’ office much as usual, while Lowenhardt, still under police protection, made steady progress towards recovery. He made a statement to the police but could say no more than what was already known. He didn’t see the man who attacked him. Biggles called regularly and, as the patient gained strength, he had several chats with him.

‘Do you know exactly where your uncle is on Sakhalin?’ he asked casually, one day.

‘Yes, he’s in the old prison of Onor,’ was the answer. ‘It is on the Sea of Okhotsk side of the island. It stands near the sea on the River Tim, which flows into the Bay of Nyisk. Years ago, the man who is now governor of the prison was himself a prisoner there. He was a murderer, but he was released by the Bolsheviks with all the other prisoners.’

‘How do you know all this?’ asked Biggles, curiously.

‘I was told by my mother, who had the information through a friend.’

‘This prison would be a difficult place to get out of, I imagine.’

‘Without help from outside it would be impossible. To get out of the prison would be only the beginning. One would then have to get off the island, and the only way that could be done, without a boat, would be to cross over to the mainland, on the ice, in winter. That would get the prisoner to Siberia. If he wasn’t recaptured he would die of starvation. I suppose that is why Sakhalin was chosen as a prison for dangerous criminals. It is now used for political prisoners. The original prisoners, the robbers and murderers, are still on the island, or their descendants are, living as best they can.’

‘One thing with another it must be a ghastly place,’ said Biggles, getting up. ‘Make haste and get well. I’ll see you again before you start for home.’

‘Shall I be allowed to go home?’

‘Probably, as your offence was only a technical one. But my chief will want to see you about that.’

‘I’ll tell him the truth about everything, as far as I know it.’

‘That’s the best thing you can do,’ asserted Biggles. ‘The doctor says you’re going on fine and if you continue to improve at this rate you should soon be out of hospital. Good-bye for now.’

That same evening he had a sharp reminder of the purpose that had brought the young German to London. The others had gone on home, but he had taken a taxi and broken his journey at the Royal Aero Club, in Piccadilly, not for any particular reason but merely to see if any old friends were passing an hour or two at this natural rendezvous for professional air pilots, past and present. He saw no one with whom he was on familiar terms, but spent a little while in the reading room skipping through the foreign aviation journals.

It was dark when he left, and he had hardly taken up a position on the curb to hail the first taxi cruising for a fare when he noticed one standing a little farther along. Its meter flag was down, showing it was engaged, but thinking that the driver might just have dropped a fare and had not yet raised the flag, he walked towards the taxi ready to engage it should this happen. From force of habit his eyes went to the number plate, and what he saw brought him sharply to a halt.

On his way to the club he had seen that same cab just behind his own. There was of course nothing remarkable about that; what had struck him as odd was the fact that although the following taxi was a new one, and could more than once have overtaken the older vehicle in which he himself was travelling, the driver had not availed himself of the opportunity. Which struck

him as unusual behaviour for a London cabby. And after the warning he had received he was extra sensitive to anything unusual.

The same thing had happened at the traffic lights at Hyde Park Corner. When the green light had come on the other car was slow to move, although, being new, it obviously had a much better acceleration than his own. He didn't see it again, so he thought no more about it. Now, here was the same taxi by the curb, showing the 'engaged' signal, in a position from which the club entrance could easily be watched. Was that coincidence or was he being followed? He didn't know, but he was not in the mood to take chances, so he changed his mind about taking that particular cab even if it became 'free'.

At that moment another taxi came along. He stopped it, and having announced his address said to the driver: 'You see that cab against the curb in front of you?'

'Yes, sir,' answered the man.

'Make a note of the number and watch if it follows us.'

'I've got it, sir,' agreed the driver, cheerfully.

Biggles stepped in and slammed the door. The driver pulled down his flag and moved off. Presently he slid back the glass panel and asked: 'Do you want me to go the shortest way, guv'nor?'

'No,' answered Biggles, thinking fast. 'Go the back doubles; that should tell us if we're being followed.' Back doubles is Cockney slang for side streets.

In a few minutes the driver called: 'He's following us, guv'nor. Do you want me to do anything about it? I can give him the slip if yer like. I can tell yer this. From the way he drives, the bloke at the wheel o' that cab ain't a regular.'

'Don't bother,' decided Biggles. 'Take me to Mount Street but drop me at the corner.'

'Just as yer like, guv'nor.'

In making his decision it must be admitted that Biggles did not expect that an attempt would be made on his life in a London street where there was always a certain amount of traffic. He was interested to see what the man shadowing him would do when he had paid off his taxi. He thought there was a chance that he might get a glimpse of him, or the driver. So far he had only seen the driver indistinctly. He had seen nothing of a passenger, but he assumed there was one. He had not forgotten what his own driver had said about the other not being a regular, which he took to mean that he was not an experienced professional cabby.

Reaching Mount Street his own car pulled in at the curb. Biggles got out. With his eyes on the other taxi, which had slowed to a crawl, he paid the fare, adding a good tip, whereupon with a cheerful 'Much obliged, sir — Good night,' the taxi went on its way, leaving Biggles standing on the pavement.

In a moment the other taxi, moving close against the curb, was level with him. An arm, pointing directly at him, was thrust out of the window. Vaguely,

behind it, was a muffled face.

Biggles didn't wait to learn the reason for this. He knew. Or at any rate, he guessed, and his instant reaction was to jump sideways like a startled cat. There was a noise that was something between a crack and a hiss, and mingled with it a vicious *whang* as a bullet struck some metal object behind him. As the taxi shot forward he lurched and fell, hoping to lead his unknown assailant to believe that he had been hit.

The taxi swung out of sight round the next corner.

Biggles got up and hurried home. He hadn't far to go. Of the man who had fired the shot at him, from a firearm fitted with a silencer, he had seen nothing. The driver had been so muffled up, with his hat pulled down, that he had seen practically nothing of him, either.

Striding into the flat he went straight to the phone, and under the wondering eyes of the others dialled Scotland Yard. Having got the extension of the Flying Squad duty officer, he gave his name and said: 'A fellow just took a crack at me, in Mount Street, with a pistol. He fired from a taxi. Here's its number. I imagine the number plates were false, but you might radio your cars to keep an eye open for it. No, I don't want an arrest. It's a political job and had better be kept quiet. If you spot the cab tail it and watch where it goes. That's all. Thanks.' Biggles hung up, and turned to face the others who were staring at him with mixed expressions.

'What happened?' asked Ginger.

Biggles narrated his adventure. 'The thing was clumsily done,' he concluded. 'They must think I'm a fool, or else I go about with my eyes shut. Once I realized I was being tailed I was ready for anything, although I must confess I didn't think they'd have the nerve to try to knock me off practically outside my own front door.'

'You might not have been so ready had it not been for young Lowenhardt tipping you off that they were out to get you,' said Algy, seriously.

'That's true,' admitted Biggles, dropping into his chair and lighting a cigarette. He smiled whimsically. 'It's a queer thought, isn't it, when you come to consider it, that I might owe my life to a man who must often have wished me dead.'

'Von Stalhein is never likely to know that,' stated Bertie.

'Pity,' murmured Biggles. 'It might have tickled his sense of humour — if he has one.'

'I've never seen any sign of it,' observed Algy, coldly.

CHAPTER 3

BIGGLES CHANGES HIS MIND

IT may as well be said at once that Biggles' opinion of the taxi that had followed him was probably correct. The number plates must have been false ones, for not only was the vehicle not seen by police cars on the watch for it, but no such taxi was registered in the Metropolitan area. More than once in the days that followed the attack Biggles suspected he was being shadowed; and, in fact, he was, for although he was unaware of it, and would doubtless have objected had he known, Inspector Gaskin, at the request of Air Commodore Raymond, had laid on plain clothes men for his protection should the attack be repeated.

It was about three weeks after this that the Air Commodore called him on the intercom telephone and asked him to step along to his office. Without the slightest suspicion of what was in the wind. Biggles went along to find his chief, hands in pockets, standing behind his desk — an attitude Biggles knew from experience meant that the Air Commodore had a problem on his mind.

'You wanted to speak to me, sir,' prompted Biggles, as the Air Commodore hesitated, as if uncertain how to begin.

'Er — yes,' was the answer. 'I've just been having a word with this lad Lowenhardt.'

'Then he hasn't gone home? I haven't seen him for some days.'

'Not yet.'

'How is he?'

'Pretty well. He was discharged from hospital ten days ago, since when he has been convalescing at a quiet seaside resort — still under our protection of course. Fellows of that age mend very quickly you know, provided there are no complications.'

'Are you going to charge him with illegal entry?'

'No. That might bring his name into the newspapers, and we'd rather the man who tried to kill him thought he was dead. As a matter of fact I saw him first a week ago, and as a result of that interview I've been able to check up on his story. It appears to be true in every detail. He told me, in confidence, the name of the German air line pilot who brought him here, a fellow on the regular Berlin-London run. I've had a word with him, too. He admitted that he gave Lowenhardt a free lift, which was naughty of him, but in the circumstances pardonable, since the trip was fixed up in the hope of preventing murder. Actually, this fellow has been friendly with von Stalhein's family for years. Anyway, since the breach of regulations was made more in your interest than anyone else's it would be rank ingratitude to prosecute.'

'Things get crazier and crazier,' observed Biggles. 'After being enemies for years we look like ending up all pals together.'

‘That’s what things have come to,’ averred the Air Commodore. ‘Friends today are enemies tomorrow and vice versa. It’s hard to keep pace, and it’s not to be wondered at if the man in the street gets all confused. But there it is. New atlases are out of date almost before they’re printed.’

‘What about this German air line pilot?’

‘Nothing, except that he’s confirmed the boy’s story and is willing to take him home if we’ll arrange an exit permit for him. It’s a dangerous game he and Lowenhardt are playing, because if they’re caught at it over the other side they’ll be for trouble in a big way.’

‘When’s Lowenhardt going home?’

‘That hasn’t been decided. It — er — may not be for some time.’

‘Why not? If he’s fit, why the delay?’

The Air Commodore answered the question with another. ‘I believe he asked you if you could do anything to help von Stalhein to get off Sakhalin.’

‘He did. I told him it was out of the question.’

‘So I gather. You will remember I suggested to you that von Stalhein, as a fount of information, would be useful to us if we could get him here in a mood in which he was willing to talk?’

‘I do. I also remember that I told you I took a dim view of that.’ Biggles stared at his chief, eyes half closed as if trying to read his mind. ‘What are you getting at?’ he asked, suspicion creeping into his voice.

‘I’ve had a word about this with Major Charles, of Intelligence Headquarters. Or rather, he’s had a word with me. He’d like to have a chat with von Stalhein.’

‘Why did you tell him about this?’

‘I didn’t. It was he who told me, before you did, that von Stalhein had been sacked and thrown into prison.’

‘And now he’d like to see the man who has been a headache to him — not to mention me — for years.’

‘Naturally. That’s why. Something’s cooking behind the Iron Curtain and maybe von Stalhein knows about it. That could be the real reason why they’ve put him behind bars. If they thought he was no longer to be trusted they wouldn’t leave him on the loose.’

‘That charge of treason was all a pack of lies,’ declared Biggles, hotly. ‘I know von Stalhein. He wouldn’t sell the people for whom he was working.’

‘He might now, after what they’ve done to him,’ said the Air Commodore softly. ‘He’s no longer working for anyone.’

Biggles looked incredulous. ‘You’re not by any chance suggesting that I go to Sakhalin and bring von Stalhein back here!’

‘He wouldn’t get away without help from outside, that’s certain.’

Biggles groped for words. ‘This kills me,’ he muttered. ‘I’ve never heard of anything so fantastic in my life!’

‘We live in days when the fantastic is fast becoming commonplace, Bigglesworth,’ said the Air Commodore, sadly. ‘May I remind you that,

strange though it may seem, Germany is now a member in the plan for the defence of Western Europe.'

'Not East Germany.'

'West Germany doesn't acknowledge such a place. To a patriotic German, Germany is still one country. How would you like to see England cut in halves, one half, with friends in it maybe, dominated by a foreign power?'

'I wouldn't.'

'Of course you wouldn't. Neither does von Stalhein in his heart approve of his country being partitioned; you may be sure of that.'

'Even if I was lucky enough to get him here he wouldn't talk.'

'After what has happened I think he would. The relationship between our two countries is very different from what it was a few years ago. All the countries of Western Europe have realized they must stand together or fall one by one. Even hereditary enemies like France and Germany, however distasteful the idea may seem at first, have come to see the wisdom of that. In these days of H-bombs, if more people in the world would see eye to eye, instead of glaring at each other across frontiers, the general public, the ordinary common people, would have less cause for anxiety. The problems that beset the world will not be solved by actions calculated to provoke hostility. If we can make a friend of von Stalhein we shall have done something really worth while.'

'But Sakhalin!' protested Biggles. 'The thing isn't possible.'

'It's not like you to talk like that.'

'I'm talking like it now.'

'Why isn't it possible?'

'In the first place I don't speak a word of Russian, which presumably is the language spoken on the island.'

'Young Lowenhardt was brought up in the Russian Zone. He speaks Russian fluently. He was forced to learn it at school.'

'How do you know?'

'I've asked him.'

Biggles sat back. He looked shaken, as he had every reason to be. 'Are you,' he asked, in a thin voice, 'are you seriously asking me to go to Sakhalin, taking young Lowenhardt with me to act as interpreter?'

'In that young man you have one who, because of his affection for his uncle, is prepared to stick his neck out as often as is necessary in order to help him. Such men can't be bought for money.'

Biggles considered his chief with a wry smile. 'I don't think I've ever said this before, sir, but don't you think, in asking me to take this on, you're asking too much?'

'Of course I do. I wouldn't have asked you on my own account.'

Unfortunately the matter has come before a higher authority who regard the project as necessary in the national interest. There's no compulsion about it. You are at liberty to decline. But if you don't go someone else will have to be

found who will go. I put the proposition to you, first because you're officially employed here, and secondly, in the light of your experience, you're better fitted than anyone else I know to tackle the job and pull it off.'

'If you put it like that you make it difficult for me to refuse,' muttered Biggles.

'I thought you'd see it like that,' murmured the Air Commodore. 'There are other factors that make you the most suitable man for the assignment. You and von Stalhein are known to each other. Even if von Stalhein suspected you of an ulterior motive, he'd have no such qualms about his own nephew — who, don't forget, he sent to you with the message warning you of your danger. And touching upon that, you're not exactly safe here at the moment.' The Air Commodore's eyes twinkled. 'The last place your enemies would think of looking for you would be where they'd send you if they could — Sakhalin.'

'It's the last place I should think of looking for myself if I had any sense,' retorted Biggles. 'This is the thanks I get for trying to be efficient,' he lamented.

The Air Commodore shrugged. 'Don't go if you'd rather not.'

'You know I'll go.' Biggles spoke firmly. 'But I make this stipulation. If I make contact with von Stalhein I'm not suggesting any terms for his rescue. I'm not saying I'll take you home if you'll tell us all you know. Nothing like that. If I bring him here that's your affair. I shall expect him to be treated as a free man, free to go where he likes and do as he likes provided he doesn't try to operate against us.'

'That's fair enough,' agreed the Air Commodore. 'As you know, we've no evidence to bring a court action against him.'

'Good. Then that settles that,' said Biggles. 'How much do the Intelligence people know about Sakhalin?'

'Frankly, practically nothing. That is, nothing in the political or military sense. They have the facts of the physical features, of course.'

'Is there anywhere I could make a landing?'

'Not that we know of. You'd better take a marine aircraft and land on the sea, or one of the rivers.'

'How am I to get to Sakhalin, anyway? We've no airfield anywhere near. I imagine Hong Kong would be our nearest territory for refuelling.'

'America has airfields in Japan. In a case like this arrangements might be made through diplomatic channels to allow you to use one of them.'

Biggles nodded. 'That would make a lot of difference. I'll have a word with young Lowenhardt to see how he feels about this. Where is he, by the way?'

'He's outside in the waiting room. I kept him handy in case you wanted to see him. I'll have him brought in.'

Biggles lit another cigarette while he was waiting.

Presently the young German came, looking at Biggles somewhat

apologetically.

Biggles came straight to the point. 'I'm told you're prepared to accompany an expedition to Sakhalin in the hope of getting your uncle out of Onor prison.'

'Yes. If there is no expedition I shall go by myself.'

'And how would you set about that?' inquired Biggles, cynically.

'Either I would get a canoe and paddle across to the island, or I would wait for the winter freeze-up and walk across on the ice. The Sea of Okhotsk doesn't freeze, but the Tartar Passage can remain frozen for months.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'That shows the right spirit, anyway,' he conceded. 'As it happens it may not be necessary for you to do either. If we go it will be by plane.'

'That would be the ideal thing,' stated the youth, calmly.

'You realize that you'll be lucky if you come out of this alive?'

'What of it? When do we start?'

'Not so fast,' requested Biggles, seriously. 'Raids like this take a little time to organize. If your uncle is inside for life, a day or two one way or the other won't make much difference.'

'I do not agree. Haste is necessary.'

'Why?'

'If my uncle Erich is forced to do hard labour in that climate, and that is the usual way with prisoners, it would kill him. He is not a weak man, but he has not been used to that sort of thing.'

'I see. How much do you know about Sakhalin?'

'Only what I have told you.'

'You know of no one at home who has been there — someone who knows his way about the prison?'

'No. People who go to Sakhalin seldom come back.'

'Not even the warders?'

'Not even the warders, who are, of course, soldiers. Even for them it is a punishment station, like others in Siberia. No one would volunteer for such duty. Ordinary men would go mad from the monotony.'

'And there is nothing more you can tell me?'

'Nothing. I am sorry.'

'No need to be sorry for what you don't know.' Biggles smiled. 'All right, Fritz. That's enough for now. We'll have another talk later on.'

'There's just one thing I've remembered. In the old days, so I once read in a book, prisoners were sent by sea, from Odessa, to Sakhalin. Because it was a long journey they are now taken by aeroplane.'

'Which means there must be an airfield.'

'That is what I was thinking.'

'You don't know where it is?'

'No. I have no idea.'

'I see. Thanks.'

The German left the room and Biggles got up and turned to follow him out. 'I'll get to work on this jaunt right away,' he told the Air Commodore. 'Take care of Lowenhardt and have him handy in case I should want to see him again. I like that lad. If I'm any judge he's as straight as they come.'

'He has guts, anyway,' remarked the Air Commodore. 'Let me know what you want. I'll give you all the help I can.'

'Fair enough, sir.'

Biggles returned to his own office where he found the others waiting in expectation of news.

'Well?' queried Ginger. Then, looking at Biggles' face, he added shrewdly, 'How bad is it?'

'We're going to Sakhalin,' announced Biggles calmly.

Algy threw a glance at Bertie and Ginger in turn. 'What did I tell you?' He looked again at Biggles. 'So you've offered to go and get dear Erich out of the mess he's fallen into!'

'I didn't offer to do anything of the sort. I was asked to go.'

'By whom?'

'The chief put forward the assignment, but the request came from higher up.'

'And you've agreed to go.'

'More or less.'

'You must be out of your mind,' declared Algy. 'Think of the irony of it. Here's the toughest job ever, and for what? To get your bitterest enemy out of a jam! Hold me up, someone, before I swoon.'

'There's no need for you to get in a flap,' announced Biggles. 'You needn't come if you don't want to. That goes for everyone.'

'If it was anyone else but von Stalhein I'd say nothing about it,' went on Algy. 'I always said you'd end up by inviting him to dinner.'

'Better than glaring at each other over gun barrels.'

'Okay, have it your way,' said Algy, gloomily. 'You'll get no thanks from that frozen-faced Prussian even if you do manage to pull him out of the soup.'

'I don't help people to earn their thanks,' returned Biggles, coldly. 'If I can make von Stalhein see that we bear no grudge against him for what has happened in the past I shall be satisfied. One of the troubles of this world is, people will look back instead of forward.'

'Let's not go all philosophical,' suggested Ginger. 'When do we kick off?'

'There are several things to do first,' answered Biggles. 'By the way, young Lowenhardt will be in the party.'

There was a brief silence.

'Why the extra load, old boy?' asked Bertie.

'Because he can speak Russian and we can't. If I know anything that lad will earn his keep. Now stop quibbling and let's get down to business.'

'Business,' breathed Ginger. 'What exactly does that mean in this case?'

'First,' answered Biggles evenly, 'we work out the best way to this

perishing island. We then go there and find somewhere to get down. Next, we scout around for the prison and after that locate the cell in which von Stalhein is due to spend the rest of his days. All that remains then is to get him out, and home. That, I think, should be enough to go on with.'

'Plenty, old boy,' murmured Bertie, polishing his monocle. 'In fact, we might say the lot.'

CHAPTER 4

OUTWARD BOUND

SIX weeks later the veteran Sea Otter amphibian of the Special Air Police was droning its way through a midnight sky at maximum altitude above the glistening ice-cold seas of the North Pacific. To the west, the narrow La Perouse Strait that separates the northern tip of Japan from the island of Sakhalin showed up clearly in the light of a gleaming silver moon, nearly full, and a sky ablaze with stars. Far to the east, the vague shadows of the nearest of the Kurile Islands could just be discerned on the horizon. Ahead, the black mass of the island that was the objective, dotted with a few sparsely separated pin-points of light, rolled on and on northward towards the fitful flickering rays of the Aurora Borealis.

So far the long journey out had been uneventful and had gone according to plan. To Hong Kong, the last British-held territory on the route, the flight had been mere routine. From there they had made the last long run to Japan, where, at American-maintained airfields, documents provided by the Air Commodore had facilitated their receptions and provided them with their fuel and oil requirements. Without such papers awkward questions would almost certainly have been asked, for apart from the personnel travelling in the aircraft the machine carried a quantity of tools and other equipment not normally to be found in a plane engaged in a round-the-world test flight — as was stated in the documents. Actually, they discovered that their arrival was anticipated, from which it was clear that the diplomatic wheels set in motion at home were working smoothly. Now, with Japan's most northerly island fading behind them the difficult and dangerous task was about to begin.

The Air Commodore had been extremely helpful in another respect.

The big problem from the outset had been the choice of a landing-ground on Sakhalin, or on the water near it. Indeed, upon this was likely to depend the success or failure of the expedition. One mistake in this respect would be fatal, not only to the machine but to all of them, for without the aircraft in an airworthy condition there would be no way of getting home. Here, of course, the big handicap was the lack of reliable information.

This problem of landing had been discussed over and over again before the start, the pros and cons of the two methods open to them being weighed against each other. These were, simply, whether to try to get down on the Tartar Channel, assuming it was still frozen over, or look for a creek or a river on the opposite side of the island. There could be no question of landing on the open Sea of Okhotsk, which more often than not was rough. It was likely that the Tartar Channel was still ice-bound, but there would be no way of confirming this until they got there. The assumption was based on the date when the ice usually broke up, which was still some weeks ahead. There

would be plenty of room on the ice, although a night landing on it would be a hazardous operation; one which no pilot, however experienced, would willingly undertake.

The big snag about this was, even supposing they got down safely, they would find themselves on the wrong side of the island, in that the prison was on the far side. They would, therefore, be faced with a long overland march in order to reach it. The state of the creeks and rivers on the nearer side was not known. They might be full of rocks or other obstructions. A reconnaissance flight in daylight would of course have answered most of Biggles' questions, but this was not seriously to be considered, for the presence of a strange aircraft over such closely guarded territory could hardly fail to attract attention. The last thing Biggles wanted was to be seen, for should that happen their difficulties would be increased a hundredfold. Whether or not there were hostile military aircraft on the island, against which he would have no defence. Biggles did not know. Nobody knew, for this was one of the areas where the Iron Curtain had been drawn very tightly. However, there must at some time have been a gap in it, as Biggles discovered in Tokyo where, in the matter of co-operation, the long arm of the Air Commodore was again revealed.

He had said to Biggles, just before the start: 'When you get to Japan go and see Colonel Cyrus Bradfield. Tell him who you are and he may be able to help you. Here's his address. He'll be expecting you.'

'You mean in this matter of getting down on Sakhalin?' questioned Biggles.

'Yes.'

'Thanks. Any information would be welcome,' returned Biggles.

Nothing more was said, but on his arrival in Japan, while the Otter was being refuelled. Biggles had gone, alone, to see the officer whom he suspected — correctly as it soon transpired — was attached to the U.S. Army Air Force Intelligence Service.

'Sit down and take the weight off your feet,' invited the Colonel, a keen-eyed, granite-faced man of about fifty, when Biggles had been shown into his office, and had produced his identity papers. 'I've been expecting you. Now, what can I do for you?'

'Can you give me any information about Sakhalin?' questioned Biggles.

'Not much. We've no great interest in the place. I've some aerial photographs you may see, if they're any use to you,' returned the Colonel.

'They'd be most helpful.'

'What part of the island interests you most?'

'The southern end. Say, the south east.'

'Okay.' The officer went to a filing cabinet and pulled out a docket. 'You needn't answer this question if you don't want to, but have you some particular purpose in mind?'

'I have an assignment to land a plane and pick up a man.'

The Colonel looked startled. 'Are you kidding?'

'I wish I was,' answered Biggles lugubriously. 'My first problem is to find a place to get down.'

'That won't be easy.'

'So I gather, but I shall have to manage it somehow.'

'What type of plane are you using?'

'An amphibian. I'm prepared for dry ground or water — or even ice. Do you happen to know if the Tartar Strait is still ice-bound?'

'I've no recent information about that, but it should be. Our planes don't go that way more than is absolutely necessary. Here are the pictures. They're all very high altitude stuff, for obvious reasons.'

'Lovely work, all the same,' observed Biggles, picking up the top photograph of several. 'Can you lend me a magnifying glass?'

'Sure.'

'Mind if I study these for a little while?'

'Go ahead. Take your time. I've some work on my desk I can get on with.'

Biggles began his scrutiny, which lasted for the best part of an hour, by the end of which time he had committed to memory the areas with which he was likely to be concerned. 'How long is it since these were taken?' he asked.

'The last lot were taken about six months ago.'

'Do your pilots meet with any opposition when they're engaged in these photographic missions?'

'Very seldom. We don't give anybody time to interfere. It's a quick dash over at top speed at around forty thousand, so even if the ship was spotted it'd be back before anything could get up to it. Which reminds me, we did lose a machine, a Sabre, not long ago. We don't know what happened to it. There's been no word from anybody. It may have had engine trouble, or run out of gas due to getting off course. We don't know. The pilot may have had to ditch his ship, but there's just a chance he came down on Sakhalin. You might keep your eyes open for a crack-up while you're there.'

'He'd be wearing a parachute?'

'Sure.'

'Then he may have baled out.'

'Could be.'

'What was his name?'

'Manton. Pat Manton.'

Biggles nodded. 'I'll keep my eyes and ears open for a lost American. One never knows. Thanks a lot, Colonel. You've been most helpful. If I can do anything for you at any time let me know.'

'Forget it. Always glad to help a friend. Good luck to you — you'll need it.'

Biggles returned to the others well satisfied with his visit, for it had enabled him to make up his mind about the landing. Having given them the gist of his conversation he said: 'There are two or three coves, or rather,

estuaries, on the prison side that should suit us. Without knowing what the surfaces are like it's bound to be tricky, particularly as it would be asking for trouble to use the engines at a low altitude. An even trickier problem may be to find somewhere to hide the plane when we are down. But we'll deal with that when the time comes. I have at least got a definite landing place in my mind's eye.'

The Otter was now well on its way to that objective. Nobody spoke. All realized that the landing Biggles proposed to make would have been dangerous even in normal circumstances; the knowledge that should the aircraft be damaged the consequences would probably prove fatal, in that they would be left on the island with small chance of ever getting off it, did nothing to make the task easier or the prospects brighter.

For some time, keeping well out to sea, the aircraft droned on across a vast bowl of darkness over which, such is the power of imagination, the stars were beginning to look hostile — or so it seemed to Ginger, who was sitting next to Biggles in the cockpit. Were eyes already watching them on radar screens? He didn't know. He hoped he would never have cause to know. What kept coming back to his mind was that all this was to help a man from whom they had so often had most to fear. However, on this occasion they were at least relieved from that particular risk.

The note of the engines dropped a tone as Biggles retarded the throttle and began edging nearer to what looked like a long ragged ink stain spilt on the face of the earth. Slowly, very slowly, its outline hardened as the machine dropped towards it. At ten thousand feet the noise of the engines died to a mutter, and with its port wing tilted down the Otter began to slip off height more quickly.

Biggles did not speak. His gaze, probing the gloom, was fixed on the land coming towards them, and Ginger knew he must be searching for the estuary, the river mouth he had noted in the photographs. As the estuary was tidal, and the tide flowing at that hour, if they could get on the water they should be carried to the shore without having to open up the engines. That was the plan, to avoid being heard. Somewhere no great distance up the river were some scattered dwellings. These also had been noted on the photographs, although there was no indication as to whether or not they were occupied, and if they were, by whom.

The state of the banks of the estuary was another unknown factor, although forest came very close to them. Should they turn out to be open mud flats, offering no cover of any sort, they would not be able to stay there, Biggles had said. To expect a medium-sized aircraft to remain in plain view for any length of time without being observed by someone would be asking too much. A deeply indented shore of cliffs would suit them. It had been impossible to make out such details from high altitude vertical photos. The question of cover was something that had to be taken on chance. But, as Biggles had remarked, they would have to take chances whatever they did.

Algy, who had been checking for drift, reported that there was little if any wind.

Five thousand, four thousand, three thousand feet registered on the altimeter, with the aircraft still going down at little more than stalling speed in order to reduce noise to a minimum, for an airborne aircraft cannot travel in absolute silence. Always there is the murmur of the motors and the whine of air over the plane surfaces, the wings and tail unit.

From a thousand feet broad features of the scene below lay in clear view, although it was still not possible to make out the details. Biggles, tense in his seat, was still slipping off height, a manoeuvre that had the effect of taking the machine nearer to the shore. To Ginger the estuary appeared wider than he expected, although this, as he reasoned, may have been the result of the flooding tide. However, it narrowed rapidly towards its inner extremity.

The Otter glided on, no lights showing.

Ginger moistened his lips, dry from the strain of watching and knowing that the vital moment was at hand. The next two or three minutes would either spell disaster or relax the tension. All that could be seen of the surface of the water was the reflection of the stars, which told them that conditions were dead calm, as was to be expected from the absence of wind.

Suddenly, with a sharp intake of breath Biggles eased back the control column and a moment or two later the Otter struck the water with a resounding splash. It bumped twice, the first time rather badly, and then surged on to run to a stop some fifty or sixty yards from a coal-black coastline. Biggles switched off and silence fell; a cold, sullen silence, with a menacing quality about it.

I'm sorry about that bump,' said Biggles, presently. 'I don't think I've done any damage, but by gosh! I nearly went right into the drink. I could have sworn I was higher than that. But it's hard to tell just where the surface is when the water's calm, even in daylight. Every time I make one of these landings outside a proper airfield I tell myself it shall be the last. However, this time we're down in one piece, thank goodness, although I don't mind telling you now that I nearly gave myself the heebie-jeebies doing it.'

Bertie appeared. 'Jolly good effort, old boy, even though you shook my bally eyeglass out of my face.'

'You're lucky it isn't at the bottom of the creek.'

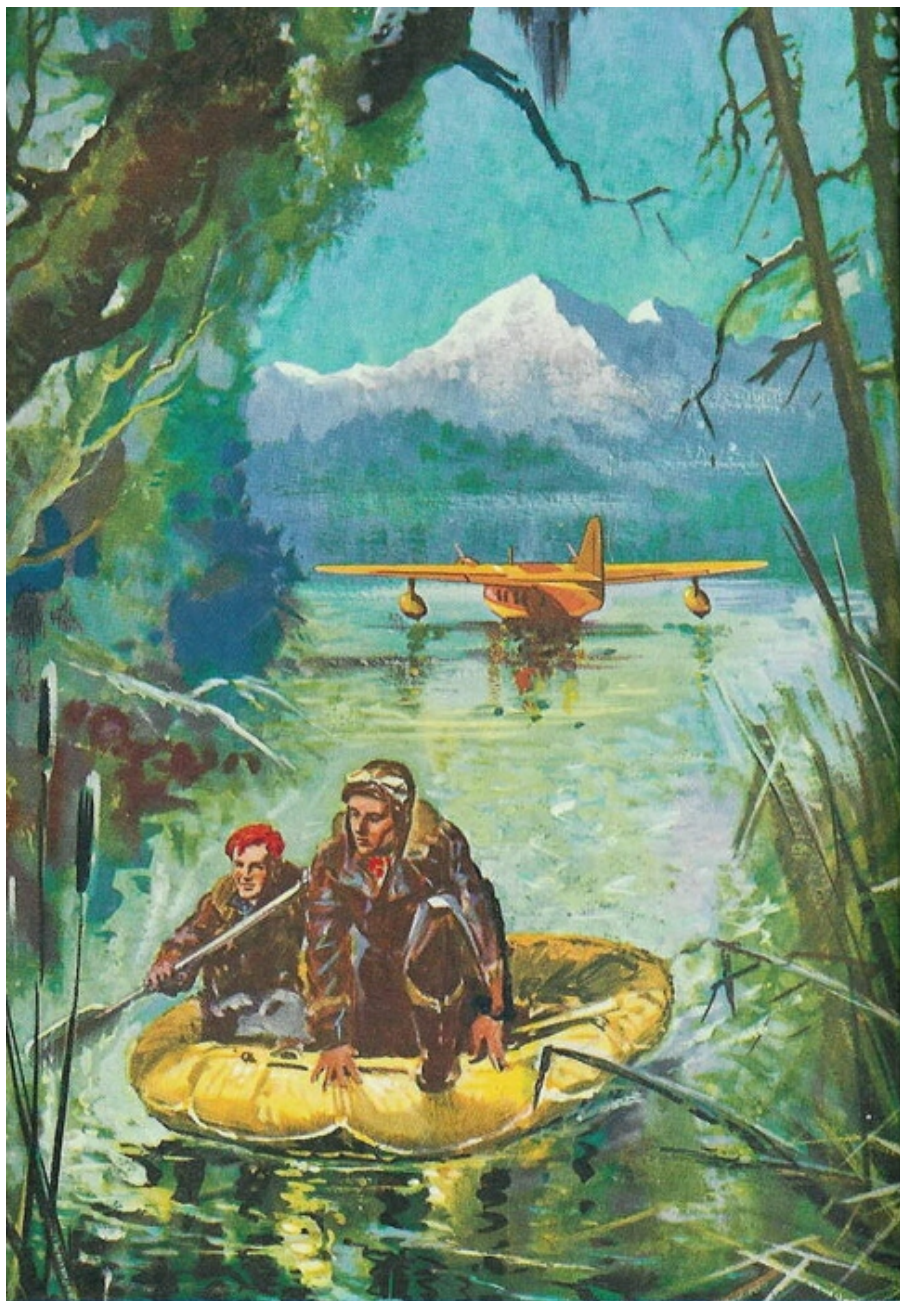
'Which — my eyeglass or my face ?'

'Both. Get the dinghy inflated. I want to have a look at the bank. The tide may take the machine in, but if it doesn't we shall have to tow her in, provided there's somewhere to put her out of sight. Don't launch the dinghy till I give the word. We'd better make sure no one saw or heard us arrive. We shall soon know.'

Ginger followed Biggles on to the hull, and there they stood together, listening, eyes questing the shore. But not a sound reached their ears. They might have landed on a dead planet. The cold was intense, and their breath

met the air like smoke. They waited and watched for several minutes. Then, as nothing occurred to alarm them. Biggles said quietly: 'Good. We're drifting in. Let's have a look where we're going.'

The dinghy was put on the water and they paddled across the short distance that separated them from what turned out to be an irregular belt of rushes, eight or ten feet high, growing out of fairly shallow water.



They paddled across to an irregular belt of rushes (page 54)

‘If we can get the machine into these it should suit us fine,’ said Biggles, satisfaction in his voice.

As he finished speaking there came such a roar of noise that although Ginger knew almost instantly what was causing it, he fell back with a cry of

consternation and nearly went overboard, while into the air continued to rise what must have been a tremendous flock of ducks or geese, he knew not which. The sky was black with them.

Slowly the noise of beating wings subsided.

‘They must have been roosting here,’ said Biggles. ‘Had they taken it into their heads to become airborne just as I was about to touch down it would have been no joke. One can’t make allowances for that sort of thing.’

‘Phew!’ breathed Ginger. ‘What a din they made. I went cold all over.’

‘We must remember those birds,’ advised Biggles, seriously. ‘They’ll come back tomorrow if not tonight, and they may do us a mischief yet. Let’s find the best place for getting the machine under cover. We’ve only an hour or so of moonlight left.’

They began to paddle along the shore, or rather, the outer edge of the rushes that guarded it like a tall, ragged palisade.

Investigation revealed that for some reason not apparent the barrier of giant reeds did not pursue a straight or even line. It wandered in and out, with the result that the belt varied in width from a hundred yards or more to a mere fringe. Indeed, there were places where rushes hardly occurred at all, and the black water appeared to lap the roots of the magnificent firs which, rising tier on tier up the hill behind, interlaced their drooping branches to form what might have been a mighty cliff of black basalt. There were also breaks where the rushes offered a narrow entrance to a labyrinth of mysterious little lagoons.

‘One of these should suit us,’ said Biggles, softly. ‘I was afraid we might have to smash a way into the rushes from the outside, making a gap that would be seen by anyone using the waterway. There are bound to be boats about. The ideal thing would be to barge into the reeds from one side, so that the gap made wouldn’t be noticed either from the water or dry land. This spot where we are now seems to be as good as any. I want to leave the machine facing open water in case we have to make a snappy getaway, yet with enough rushes between to prevent us from being seen by boats leaving or entering the river. I don’t want too many rushes in the way, either; they wouldn’t do the airscrews any good if we had to thresh a way out of them. We’ll tow the machine in if we can. I don’t want to start the engines again.’

‘How far do you reckon we are from the prison?’ asked Ginger, as they paddled back to the aircraft.

‘As the crow flies when it’s sober not more than three or four miles.’

They forced their cumbersome dinghy to the machine.

‘Here, I say, chaps, you fairly put the breeze up us when you bounced those dicky birds,’ greeted Bertie, as they bumped gently against the side of the Otter. ‘At first I thought you’d barged into a school of hippos.’

‘Hippos don’t fly,’ returned Biggles, curtly.

‘Jolly good thing for us, too, old boy — if you get my meaning,’ said Bertie, cheerfully.

‘Quit fooling,’ requested Biggles. ‘We’ve work to do, and not too much time to do it in if we’re to finish by daylight. The bank is lined with rushes — big stuff — and we shall have to get the machine into ‘em. I’m not going to start up so it means towing her in. If necessary we’ll get a line ashore and haul her across. Let’s get cracking.’

‘I wish it wasn’t so perishing cold,’ muttered Algy.

‘Some exercise will warm you up and I can give you plenty of that,’ promised Biggles.

Slowly, although without any great difficulty, the Otter was towed tail first through the selected gap into the rush-girt lagoon. It was not so easy to get the machine into the rushes, in the position in which Biggles wanted it, but after some hard work in which knives had to be used it was done. Reeds that were cut were handed up to Ginger on the centre-section. He spread them out to cover as much as possible of the upper surfaces. From his elevated position he was able to announce that there were about fifty yards of rushes between them and the forest.

‘Why not take the machine right through to the trees, old boy?’ suggested Bertie.

‘That would leave a gash that might be spotted from the air,’ said Biggles. ‘There might be an air patrol along this piece of coast for all we know. Aside from that I’d sooner be near the open water in case we have to push off in a hurry. We can use the dinghy to get ashore. That won’t leave much of a track.’

More rushes were spread over the plane surfaces and by dawn the job was completed to Biggles’ satisfaction. The dinghy, which was left inflated against the hull ready for use, also received a covering of reeds. What caused Biggles some concern, after the tide had turned, was the arrival of hundreds of wildfowl which lined the mudflats left by the receding water, obviously in search of food.

‘Those birds are a pest,’ stated Biggles, irritably. ‘They’ll rise and get in the way if we have to take off. If we scare them someone may see them and wonder what startled them. I imagine these are their regular feeding grounds. I see wild geese among them. If one of those collided with us it wouldn’t do either of us any good. However, we can’t have it all ways. We’ve done pretty well so far. Let’s get inside and have some breakfast.’

‘Are you going ashore today?’ asked Fritz.

‘Possibly,’ replied Biggles. ‘For the moment we’d better sit tight to see if anything happens. We shall soon know if our arrival was noticed. Someone will be sent to investigate.’

Watch was kept while they had a meal, with hot coffee from a big vacuum flask.

All remained quiet until nearly ten o’clock when the wisdom of Biggles’ precautionary measures was demonstrated.

‘Here comes a boat,’ announced Ginger. ‘Two boats. They’re coming

down the river.'

This, naturally, produced a few minutes of anxiety as the two boats, small, rough-looking craft, drifted out into the estuary. Relief came when each hoisted its single sail and stood out towards the open sea.

'They're not looking for us,' decided Biggles. 'I'd say they're going to fish. They must have come from that settlement higher up. The birds took no notice of them which suggests this is a regular thing. We'll check what time they come back. There may be others, so we shall have to keep our eyes skinned. I don't think they'll see us if we keep still. It's a movement that catches the eye.'

A pale, misty sun crept up over the horizon. There was not much warmth in it, but sufficient to roll back the grey mist that shrouded the tall, forest-clad mountains that formed the backbone of the island.

CHAPTER 5

DRAMA IN THE FOREST

FOR two hours all remained quiet. The only sign of activity, apart from wildfowl which from time to time wheeled off to a new position, was the two boats, well out in the mouth of the estuary, obviously fishing.

‘I think we might take a chance and go ashore,’ said Biggles at last. ‘It may take a little while to push the dinghy through the rushes.’

In this he was right. The water was shallow, never more than three or four feet deep, but icy cold, so there was no question of wading if it could be avoided. The work had to be done from the dinghy, and was accomplished by reaching forward, seizing some rushes, and pulling on them. The last few yards were the worst, for there was not enough depth of water to float the dinghy properly and they had to push their way ashore through soft mud.

Under the giant firs with their sagging branches a deathly silence reigned. Movement made no sound, for the forest floor was deep in dead fir needles dotted with cushions of harsh grey moss. So close did the trees stand together that the only place where it was possible to see for any distance was along the edge of the rushes, where there was a narrow gap between them and the forest. Looking along this they saw a brown bear come out. It had a good stare at them and then ambled away along the gap without any sign of hostility.

‘He won’t interfere with us if we don’t interfere with him,’ remarked Biggles.

There appeared to be no end to the forest. From where they stood they could see nothing but the sombre trees. It was the same on the far side of the estuary. There was no smoke to indicate the presence of human beings.

Nothing Ginger had ever seen had looked so bleak, so repellent, so grim, more darkly colourless than this. The atmosphere of tragedy could be felt. It was as if the human misery for which the island was notorious had imparted something to the very landscape. Even the branches of the firs that filled the scene hung low, as if they, too, had abandoned hope, or were ashamed of their surroundings. The summits of the mountains, still streaked with the snows of winter, cold and hard against the sky, frowned as with an awful relentlessness. Always there was a feeling of impending danger, lurking and overpowering.

In a word, the place looked what it was, a land where the horrors of the past still lingered, where the present! could breed a despair which only death would end.

Apparently they all felt the same, for presently Algy said: ‘I never saw a more depressing place than this.’

‘Absolutely! How right you are,’ declared Bertie. ‘All these beastly firs fair give me the creeps.’

‘They might be watching us — and hating us,’ said Algy. ‘Yet it reminds

me of something.'

'It is like the Black Forest in my country, but worse,' put in Fritz.

'That's it,' returned Algy quickly. 'Pictures in books of German fairy tales.'

'The only things missing are the princes and princesses,' contributed Ginger, trying to strike a cheerful note.

'I doubt if we shall see any princesses, but we may run into some ogres before we're through,' opined Biggles — a prediction which Ginger was soon to remember.

'Well, let's get on with it,' suggested Algy.

Standing just inside the forest they discussed in low voices the business that had brought them to this uninviting land, and the best way to proceed having seen something of it.

'Where is this beastly prison, anyhow?' asked Bertie. 'Let's have a look at it.'

Biggles replied: 'All the Air Commodore could find out about it, and this he got from a Polish refugee who claimed he had seen the place, was that it stands on a piece of rising ground not very far up this river.'

'Above the houses, or whatever the things are you saw on Colonel Bradfield's photos?' queried Ginger.

'I imagine so. What I took to be small houses are strung out for half a mile, but the nearest shouldn't be more than a couple of miles from where we stand. There was a big building shown on one of the photos, but there was no indication of what it was. The Colonel didn't know. The ground round it was a bit of a mess, as if an area of the forest had been cleared.'

Said Bertie, 'How about breezing along to have a dekho. It's a fine day. Limber our muscles, and all that sort of thing.'

'I'd rather not be seen, so soon after our arrival,' replied Biggles.

'Nobody will see us if we keep to the forest.'

Fritz supported this proposition with enthusiasm. He was obviously keen to get on with the programme.

Biggles hesitated. 'We shall have to go sometime, I suppose, but I intended to spend the day here to watch for signs that might indicate we had been seen or heard coming in. The noise those ducks made taking off must have been heard for some distance.'

'Let me go alone,' suggested Fritz. 'If I run into anyone, being able to speak Russian I should be able to get away with it. I might get some useful information.'

'That strikes me as being a dangerous way of getting it,' argued Biggles. 'It might be safer than if we all went together.'

'Well, let's do something,' pleaded Ginger. 'It's chilly standing here doing nothing, even though I'm wearing my winter woollies.'

After some further demur Biggles was persuaded to allow Ginger and Fritz to make a preliminary reconnaissance. They were not to go far. Even if they

saw no one the limit of their walk was to be the first of the houses, their object being no more than to see if they were occupied. If they saw any signs of activity they were to return at once.

‘When you come back you’ll find us in the machine,’ he concluded. ‘Give us a whistle and we’ll send the dinghy for you. We’ll watch for you. By the way, Fritz, have you a weapon of any sort in case you do run into trouble?’

‘Yes. Ginger has lent me a pistol.’

‘All right. But we don’t want any shooting unless it’s a matter of life or death.’

‘I understand.’

Ginger and Fritz set off, moving with the greatest caution along the gap between the rushes and the edge of the forest. It was soon clear that this was a regular track used by animals if not by human beings. Ginger watched for boot marks but saw none, although that did not mean there were none, for in the soft patches of mud where they would have shown the ground was generally churned up. There were deer slots, both large and small, and what he took to be the footprints of a bear — perhaps the animal they had seen. At frequent intervals there were places where the creatures of the forest came to the water to drink.

All this continued without change for what Ginger judged to be nearly a mile; and still the track ran on, always skirting the water. They saw no one. By this time the two sides of the estuary were beginning to close in, which suggested they were nearing the river of which the broad estuary was the mouth.

Presently Ginger stopped, looking ahead to a point where the track rounded a bend. ‘We’d better not go much farther,’ he said.

‘We may see something from the next bend,’ answered Fritz.

They went on. But they had not reached the bend when they were brought to a halt by a sound which, in the silence, came as clear and sharp through the cold air as the report of a rifle. Actually, Ginger knew it was not a gunshot. There was no mistaking it. It was the crisp crack of an axe falling on wood. Instinctively he sidestepped into the forest, and Fritz did the same.

‘There must be somebody about. That was an axe,’ he said softly.

Fritz nodded. ‘We’d better see who it is, and which way he goes, so that we don’t collide with him.’

Ginger was not too keen on this, but he realized advisability of it, so with great caution they moved forward in the direction of the sound, from which some slight noise was still coming. Before long they saw the cause. A man was standing in a narrow glade doing something to a log that lay at his feet. On the ground beside him, dead, were stretched out two small furry animals which Ginger took to be otters. Close to what was evidently a trap lay a dead fox.

But Ginger’s interest was fastened on the man, whose every action suggested a sort of animal watchfulness. That he was a peasant of the lowest

order was at on apparent from the rough, mud-stained and tattered clothes he wore, which seemed to be a mixture cloth and the remains of skins of dead animals. They draped on a gaunt frame and were gathered in at waist by a leather belt from which hung an axe. That he was getting on in years was clear, for long, uncut hair and beard were streaked with white. Little could be seen of his face by reason of the tangled hair. Ginger put his age at not less than sixty. But he seemed active enough. He appeared to have no weapon except the axe.

After a last, almost furtive look around, he picked the dead animals and slinging them over his should strode away.

‘A hunter,’ breathed Fritz, as soon as it was safe to speak.

‘I’d call him a trapper,’ said Ginger. ‘Did you notice the two otters?’

‘They were sables.’

‘Phew. Sables are valuable.’

‘Very.’

‘We shall have to be careful if trappers work in this forest.’

‘No doubt they work in all the forests.’

‘It’s as well to know that,’ said Ginger, seriously. ‘There may be bear traps about, and it would be no joke to step into one. Do you think that man was one of the prisoners?’

‘No. Let’s see where he goes,’ suggested Fritz. ‘If he has a house near that is something we ought to know.’

Taking every possible precaution, parting the low-sweeping fir branches with their hands, they moved forward on the trail of the hunter who they could hear just in front of them. This took them to the water’s edge, where a crude cockleshell of a boat, small and lopsided, made of bark and sealskins, had been pulled up on the mud. The man did not go to it, as Ginger thought he would, but soon turned back into the forest.

Keeping close against the trees they came presently to what they were prepared to find, for the smell of wood smoke had become noticeable.

Standing alone in a little clearing was a house, or rather, a rude hut, or shack, built of turves and fir logs. Nothing more wretched, more squalid, as a human habitation, could have been imagined, yet this apparently was where the man lived, for as he walked to the low entrance that served as a door, a tired-looking woman, clad in rags that would have shamed a scarecrow, came out. With a hand resting against a doorpost her frail body was shaken by a fit of coughing so violent that it made Ginger wince. A small boy of perhaps five or six years old ran to her and tried to comfort her.

On the wall of the house a bear skin had been stretched out to dry. From a line in front hung a row of fish, about the size of salmon, split and hung in the sun, also to dry in the cold air.

All this Ginger could see clearly, although he and Fritz kept well back in the surrounding firs. Well satisfied with the results of his reconnaissance, and supposing that the hunter would now go into the house with his family, he

was prepared to retire, and in fact would have done so had there not been a sudden development to engage his attention.

It was announced by the thud of hooves, and round the corner came three horsemen, one leading, followed closely by two others. All were in uniform, the leader apparently an officer, better dressed than the others.

Wearing a round hat of some black, curly fur, he was a small, broad-faced man, with a scowl on his face. He carried a riding whip in his hand and revolver holster on his hip. Cartridge-filled bandoliers crossed his chest.

‘Cossacks,’ whispered Fritz.

The arrival of this trio gave Ginger a shock, for his immediate thought was, naturally, that the troops were a patrol looking for the aircraft. However, this was soon revealed not to be the case. The first indication of it came from the behaviour of the hunter and his wife, who cowered back as if in fear as the horsemen dismounted, the leader throwing his reins to one of his followers. At the same time, looking at the peasant, he rapped out something in a harsh voice. But what shook Ginger was the way the man put his heavy boot against the boy, who had walked up to him, and sent him reeling back, to fall heavily. The child burst into tears while its parents stood by, watching helplessly.

Fritz, his face pale, started forward, but Ginger held him back. ‘Stand still,’ he said tersely. ‘We’d be mad to interfere.’

The rest of the scene was hardly to be believed. For some minutes the officer subjected the peasant and his wife to what sounded like a fierce interrogation. At the end of it he lashed out at them freely with his whip. Finally he remounted his horse. One of his supporters picked up the two sables and the three of them went off at a gallop. The peasant and his wife, with dumb misery on their faces, watched them go and then, hurrying to the sobbing child took him inside.

Ginger drew a deep breath. ‘That was a pretty exhibition I must say,’ he muttered. ‘I wouldn’t have believed it had I not seen it. Could you hear what it was about, Fritz?’

‘I couldn’t hear very well, but as far as I could make out it was something to do with not handing over those sables to somebody at once.’

‘The man hadn’t time.’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘Were they speaking in Russian?’

‘Yes.’

‘What a life. What a place to live. Let’s get back.’

‘Wait. I have a thought.’

Ginger looked at Fritz inquiringly. ‘What is it?’

‘Those wretched people must hate the soldiers.’

‘With good reason. What of it?’

‘They might be willing to help us.’

‘You mean — out of revenge?’

‘Yes.’

‘They looked scared to death. To let them see you would be taking an awful risk.’

‘I think it’s worth it. They could tell us a lot, if they I would, and save us much time and trouble.’

Ginger looked doubtful.

‘Let me talk to them,’ persisted Fritz. ‘I would promise them some food. They look as though they could do with some — particularly that poor child. The man must know something about the prison. Naturally, I wouldn’t say how many there were of us, or how we got here, although he may find that out for himself if he uses the track beside the water, as I expect he does.’

Ginger agreed, not without some reluctance. It was Fritz’s argument that the man might discover them that decided him.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘What shall I do?’

‘You stay here and watch what happens. Don’t let him see you. If he kills me run away.’

‘Very well, if you’re prepared to take a chance on that.’

‘I go,’ said Fritz, and strode briskly towards the door.

Ginger, backing a little farther under the trees sat against one to watch. He saw Fritz knock. He saw the door open. Fritz went in. The door was closed.

It was half an hour before it was opened again and to Ginger’s great relief, Fritz came out. He walked without stopping past the tree behind which Ginger was hiding and only pulled up to wait for him when they were well clear of the hut.

‘I thought it better not to let those people see you,’ said Fritz. ‘Not that it matters, I think. We have nothing to fear from them.’

‘Then you learned something?’

‘Much. Shall I tell you here or wait until we get back?’

‘Tell me now,’ said Ginger. ‘We’d better not stand on the track in case somebody comes this way. Let’s sit in the forest. This log will do. Now go ahead and tell me about it,’ he concluded, as they sat on the fallen tree which he had indicated.

‘We talked much, but I will make it as short as possible,’ began Fritz. ‘That man and his wife are Russians. Their names are Ivan and Olga Miskoff. He was once a well-to-do farmer near Vladivostock, owning his land. On an unlucky day twelve years ago he gave food and shelter to some Japanese fishermen who had been driven ashore in a storm. It was an act of simple humanity, but for this they were tried for harbouring enemies of the State. It was said the men were really seal poachers, but if that was true Miskoff says he knew nothing of it. He and his wife were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment on Sakhalin.’

Ginger’s eyes opened wide. ‘Ten years for that!’

‘Miskoff says they were lucky to escape the death penalty. As an additional punishment they were banished for life, which is why they are still here. That, Miskoff tells me, is commonly the fate of people who are sent to Sakhalin.’

The real object of that is to prevent them from going home to claim their property.'

'Then they have served their sentence?'

'Yes.'

'They must know all about the prison.'

'They do. When their time was up they were released, but they could not leave Sakhalin. They were put out of the prison to fend for themselves, to live or die as the case might be. They built that hut in which to end their days making a bare living by fishing and trapping. The little boy, Mishka, is not theirs, although he doesn't know it. His parents, who lived in a shack a little higher up the river, died, so they took care of him.'

'What was all that fuss about just now?'

'Although the Miskoffs are free they are not left in peace. Officials from the prison sometimes come to make sure they are still there. This applies not only to the Miskoffs. There are other ex-prisoners living in the same conditions. What happened this morning was, Ivan had been lucky — or thought he had. He had caught two sables in his traps, and their furs are valuable.'

'Isn't he supposed to do that?'

'There's no law against it. Unfortunately, it so happened that Lieutenant Vostov — he's the officer we saw — came along with his patrol and saw the animals before Ivan could hide them. He knew Vostov would want them. As we saw, he took them. He is a hateful man. He himself was a thief before he came here. That was why he was sent here. You must understand this is only what Ivan told me, but I believe it to be the truth.'

'Do the authorities permit this sort of thing?' asked Ginger, indignantly.

'It's unlikely that they know anything about it. Miskoff says he daren't make a complaint for fear of what Vostov would do to him. He says that when his wife is dead he will kill Vostov with his axe.'

'Is she likely to die?'

'Yes. She is dying of tuberculosis and cannot live much longer. How could she, in those dreadful conditions. She will die any day now. She was coughing all the time I was in there.'

'They'll hang Miskoff if he kills Vostov.'

'He says he doesn't care what happens to him when she is dead. For the moment he must live to provide her with what little food he is able to get.'

'What a ghastly story,' said Ginger. 'Poor wretches. You seem to have got into Miskoff's confidence very quickly. How was that?'

'Because I told him frankly why I was here.'

'What exactly did you tell him?'

'He knew of course by my accent that I was not Russian, so I told him the truth; that I was a German from Berlin, that my uncle was a political prisoner in Onor and that I had come to help him to escape. He could well appreciate that. Once he realized that his enemies were my enemies the rest was easy. He

understood the need for secrecy. He said he'd help me in any way possible.'

'You're sure he won't betray you?'

Fritz shook his head. 'Not he. I don't think I ever realized what hate could be until I saw the look in Ivan's eyes when he spoke of Vostov. If he has any passion left in him it is for revenge.'

'I imagine he must know his way about the prison?'

'Yes. Which reminds me: he said a little while ago was a rumour that an American was in there. He didn't know his name or anything about him. Rumours are bound to leak out because some of the prisoners are taken to labour in the forest or in the mine.'

'Mine? What sort of mine?'

'It isn't exactly a mine but an outcrop of coal near the surface.'

'You didn't say anything about our plane or the rest of our party?'

'No. I thought that could come later, when Biggles has been informed of what we have learned.'

'I think you were wise, there. We've done a good morning's work. Let's get back and tell the others about it.'

Keeping careful watch and sometimes standing in the forest to listen, they set off down the track.

CHAPTER 6

A STRANGE ALLY

HALF an hour later Ginger and Fritz were in the cabin of the aircraft recounting their strange and harrowing experience to the others who, in the intensity of their interest, did not speak until they had finished. Then it was Biggles who replied.

‘Great work,’ he congratulated. ‘I see several angles to this,’ he went on. ‘It could turn out to be a bad show or a stroke of astonishing luck. It’s too early to say which.’

‘Why a bad show?’ queried Ginger.

‘If this unhappy man Miskoff loses his head and goes off at the deep end the place is likely to be buzzing with troops or prison warders. In any case, if one of these riders makes a practice of coming along this side of the estuary in broad daylight he could hardly fail to notice, from the back of a horse, the trail of broken rushes between the bank and the machine. There is no way of avoiding that. We couldn’t get to dry ground anywhere without leaving marks.’

Fritz spoke. ‘The patrol may not come as far as this. I didn’t ask Miskoff if this end of the track was patrolled because I didn’t think of it; but he did mention that his was the last house along this side.’

‘Do you think Miskoff really meant what he said about killing Vostov with an axe if his wife died?’

‘Without a doubt. And I would guess that having killed Vostov he’ll probably kill himself.’

‘Is his wife really ill?’

‘She had a terrible fit of coughing while I was there. I’m not a doctor but she looked as if she was going to die. Any one of those attacks could be the last.’

Algy looked at Biggles anxiously. ‘What are you going to do about this? We seem to have struck a dangerous place to park the machine.’

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘I think we’d better get in touch with Miskoff again without wasting any time. The first thing to find out is if this track is patrolled regularly. If it isn’t we’re okay. Apart from that he must know all about what goes on here, information that would be invaluable to us. That is, if we can get him on our side.’

‘He’d be on the side of anyone who would strike a blow against his real enemies,’ declared Fritz. ‘I know the type. All he has left to lose is his life, and after what he’s been through he won’t regard that as of any great consequence.’

‘If I went and saw him you could act as interpreter.’

‘Of course. I’d suggest right away, because the patrol is hardly likely to

call on him twice in one day.'

'Take the woman some food — condensed milk, and that sort of thing,' suggested Ginger.

'That might be dangerous,' answered Biggles. 'If some prowler found an empty can with an English label it would start something.'

'He could be warned not to leave anything about.'

'Suppose I go and bring him here,' offered Fritz. 'I'm sure you needn't be afraid of him betraying you. When a man hates as Miskoff hates Vostov, he hates with everything he's got.'

'At this stage it might be better if I went to see him,' decided Biggles.

'We'll have a quick bite of lunch and move off. I'll go with Fritz. The rest of you can lay on some more camouflage and perhaps do something to make the gap in the reeds less conspicuous. By the way, Fritz,' he went on, after Ginger had observed that the two fishing boats were on their way back to the river, 'how does Miskoff catch his fish?'

'He told me he has a home-made boat of sorts,' returned Fritz. 'He doesn't go far. He can catch all the fish he needs without leaving the estuary. We saw a boat which I take to be the one.'

The simple meal finished, Ginger took Biggles and Fritz to dry ground in the dinghy. Biggles' last words, as they set off down the track, were: 'We shouldn't be more than a couple of hours at the outside.'

Ginger paddled back to the Otter, and he with Algy and Bertie set about the task allotted to them, always keeping watch, of course, on the estuary as well as the track. Thus engaged, the afternoon passed quickly, and with the sun dropping into the mountains the light began to fade. The deadly chill in the air, which it had done something to dispel, returned.

'Biggles has been gone over two hours,' remarked Ginger, as he wiped his hands with a towel after having washed the mud off them. 'I hope nothing's gone wrong. He told me he reckoned on being back in a couple of hours at the outside.'

Although he made this observation he was not seriously worried; nor were any of them; because on a venture such as the one on which Biggles was engaged there was always a possibility of a delay. But when another hour had brought twilight without any sign of Biggles or Fritz he began to take a different view.

'Things can't have gone as he anticipated or they'd have been back before this,' he said, frowning.

His conjecture was correct. Things had not gone according to plan, although the lonely, forest-girt house, had been reached without hindrance, or trouble of any sort.

From within the gloomy firs that fringed the little glade Biggles and Fritz stopped to reconnoitre the scene. The ramshackle door was closed. There was nobody in sight. Not a sound broke a silence so profound as to be almost tangible.

‘I have a feeling there’s something wrong here,’ muttered Biggles.

‘They must be inside,’ said Fritz, but there was no conviction in his voice.

‘We’d better have a look,’ returned Biggles. ‘We might stand here for a long time without learning anything.’

They made a discreet advance. Biggles went to the one small window and after listening for a moment tried to see inside; but the interior was so dim that nothing could be seen clearly. He went on to the door and knocked. There was no answer. He tried again with the same result. After an exchange of glances with Fritz he lifted the simple bobbin latch and gently pushed the door open to show, as he had been led expect, that the dwelling comprised one room only in which the family lived, ate and slept.

A glance revealed that tragedy had preceded them. On a miserable trestle bed against the far wall was a woman, and it did not need the hands crossed on her breast to show that she was dead. Sitting on the floor beside the bed was a small boy, his face tear-stained. The man Miskoff was not there.

‘Ask the boy where his father is,’ Biggles said softly to Fritz.

Fritz put the question.

The boy did not answer. He looked frightened, and turning his head away began to cry.

‘This is a melancholy business,’ lamented Biggles. ‘I don’t see what we can do about it. The woman is beyond help, and if Miskoff has gone off to carry out his threat the sooner we’re out of this the better.’

Fritz had another try at questioning the boy, asking him where his father had gone and if he was carrying his axe; but he could get no reply.

Biggles shook his head. ‘It’s no use.’

‘What shall we do?’

‘We might wait a little while to see if Miskoff returns. If he doesn’t, all we can do is go back. I can’t believe Miskoff has gone for good, or he wouldn’t have left the child here like this. But we’d better not stay in here in case someone else comes.’

They retired to their original position just inside the forest and settled down to wait.

About an hour later their patience was rewarded when Miskoff appeared, striding towards the house. In his hand he carried a spade. The axe still swung on his belt. Fritz revealed himself and the man changed direction towards him. A wave of sympathy swept over Biggles as he looked at him. His face was white, set, and without expression. His eyes were those of a man from whom all hope, all feeling, has fled.

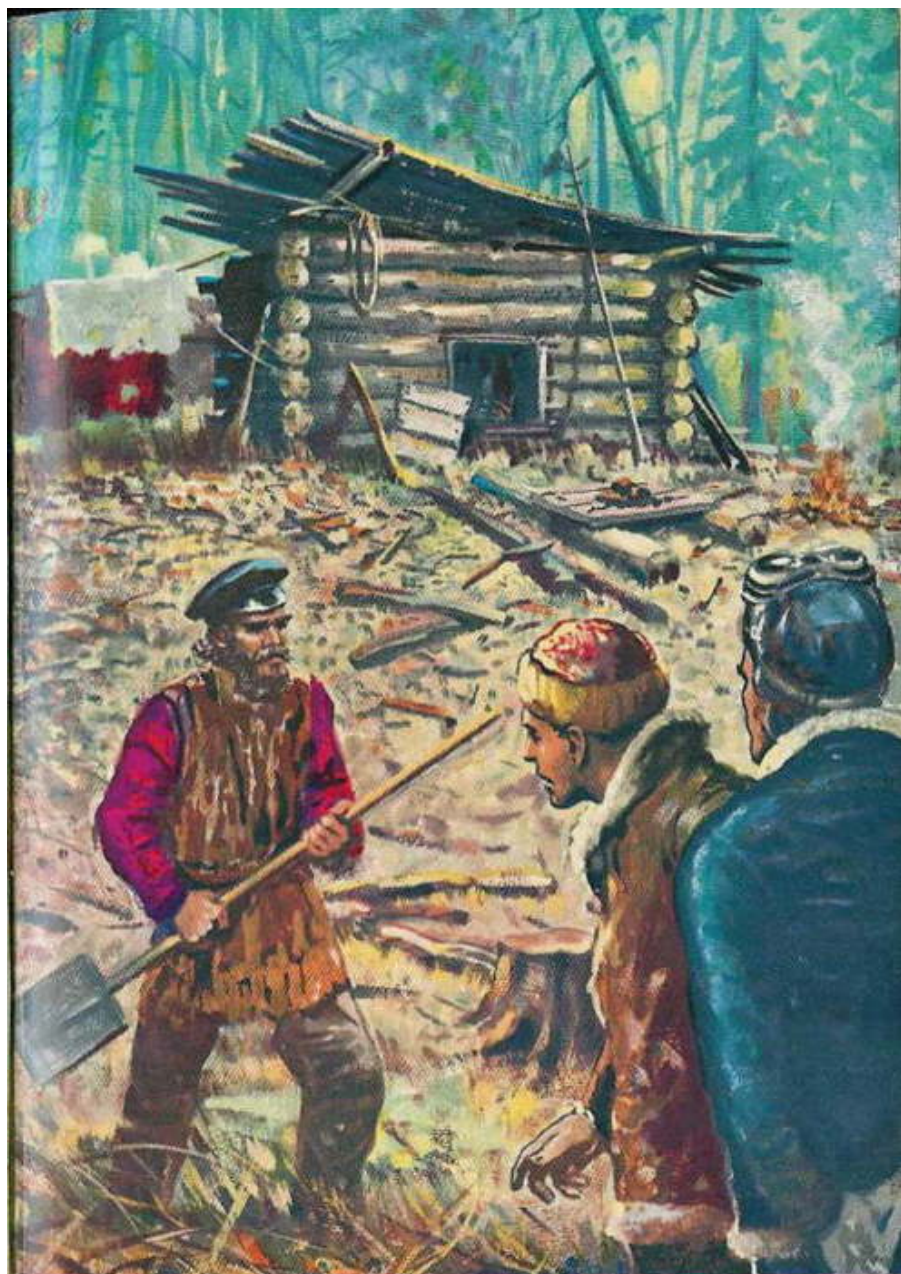
‘Your wife is dead,’ said Fritz, rather lamely, presumably to open the conversation.

‘Yes, my wife is dead,’ replied Miskoff, in a queer matter-of-fact voice.

‘Have you been to look for Vostov?’

‘Not yet. There were other things to do. I have been to borrow a spade to bury my wife and ask a widow she would take care of the child. I am going to

take the child to her now.' Miskoff looked at Biggles. 'Who is this man?'



'Who is this man?' asked Miskoff (page 77)

'A friend.'

‘So.’

‘What will you do when you have taken the child?’ asked Fritz, who was translating to Biggles as the conversation proceeded.

‘I shall wait here for Lieutenant Vostov to come. Then I shall kill him. Then I shall burn my house to the ground and take to the forest.’ Miskoff spoke in a voice without passion. He might have been talking of killing a mouse.

‘Can you live in the forest?’

‘I know of a cave. It was his.’ Miskoff pointed to the bear skin on the wall of the house. ‘Now it will be my home until I die. No one will find me there.’

‘Tell him I’d like to talk to him if he is willing,’ Biggles told Fritz.

Fritz, having put the question, replied. ‘You must wait until he has taken the child to the widow. He will come back.’

‘Very well.’

Miskoff went to the house, to reappear with the boy, who he led away by the hand.

Biggles sat down on a tree stump to wait. ‘I have a feeling this isn’t true,’ he said to Fritz, as he lit a cigarette. ‘It’s hard to believe there is such misery in the world. The things men do to each other! Miskoff talks as if he was a man of some education.’

‘I think so. You see what the treatment here has done to him. It will be the same with my uncle if he is left here. I’m sure you will agree that whatever he may have done against you he does not deserve that.’

‘No man does,’ stated Biggles.

They had to wait for nearly an hour before Miskoff returned. He came straight to them. He still showed no signs of emotion.

‘Now I am at your service,’ he said in a flat, even voice. Fritz had to translate this, of course.

‘I will tell you why we are here; then you can tell us if you are willing to help us,’ answered Biggles, speaking through Fritz, who acted as interpreter with such fluency that the three-cornered conversation lost little by repetition. It went like this.

‘We have no boat,’ continued Biggles. ‘We came here in a plane which we have hidden in the rushes on this side of the water. Do people use the path that runs between the rushes and the forest?’

‘Except on rare occasions, when it may be used by a hunter or a fisherman, it is used only by me,’ was the reply. ‘The Cossack patrol has no reason to go past this house. But when I have left here after killing that son of Satan, Vostov, the patrols will be everywhere looking for me.’

‘Vostov has an escort.’

‘I shall kill them all. When they do not return to prison a search will be made for them. I shall put bodies where they will not be easy to find.’

Biggles looked at Miskoff askance. ‘You really intend to kill Vostov?’

‘Certainly. He has made my life a hell — and others’ too. He has much

blood on his hands. Now his shall be on mine.'

'If you kill him they'll kill you.'

'First they will have to catch me, and I am as much home in the forest as the bears and the wolves. And they do catch me, what have I to live for? I have lost my wife, and the boy who was a son to me, on the same day. All I had left in the world when I came here was my wife. By their treatment of her she is dead. That calls for revenge.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'I can understand how you feel. Couldn't you get away from Sakhalin now?'

'I have no desire to leave. Such hopes died long ago. There is only one purpose left in my life and I have told you what that is.'

'Would money be any use to you?'

'Nothing would be any use to me now.'

Biggles went on to explain, in as few words as possible, the purpose of his presence on the island. 'Since you have spent so much time in the prison, can you suggest in what part von Stalhein would most likely be? Have you by any chance seen him?'

'It is possible. I do not know. I have never heard of him by name.'

'Then how could you have seen him?'

'On his way to work. Everyone who can walk must work, either at the saw mill in the forest or at the coal face.'

'Would it be easier to reach him when he is outside or within the walls of the prison?'

'It would be difficult to get into the prison. Many soldiers live within the walls, as well as the prisoners.'

'I suppose the soldiers guard the prisoners when they are outside?'

'Always. They carry loaded rifles and shoot at anyone who runs. In all the time I was there only one man escaped. He was so tired of life that he ran hoping to be shot, as the quickest way of dying. Many bullets were fired at him, but by a miracle not one struck him. He fled to the mountains. What happened to him after that I do not know. He never returned to the prison. Other prisoners have talked of doing the same thing, but it requires nerve.'

'What are the actual conditions inside the prison? How many prisoners are there altogether?'

'The number varies as some die and new ones come. Usually there are about a hundred. There are some women in a different part of the prison. They have to do the cooking and cleaning.'

'How are the men arranged?'

'Except for those in solitary confinement they live in large cells of ten men each, eating and sleeping there. Each cell is exactly the same, long and narrow. At one end is a door, and at the other an iron-barred window overlooking a central courtyard. A high thick wall encloses everything. Sentries patrol the top of the wall day and night. Beyond the wall there is a moat, not very wide but full of deep mud. One man, in a fit madness, ran up

the steps leading to the top of wall and jumped off. He disappeared into the mud and was never seen again. Only one bridge crosses the moat, at the gate, which is always guarded.'

Biggles looked at Fritz and grimaced. 'That doesn't sound too good. But there, with the sort of people they have here a prison that was easy to get out of wouldn't be much use. Fritz, ask him what is name of the governor.'

Fritz did so.

'Colonel Kerennin,' he informed, repeating the name Miskoff had given.

'What sort of man is he?'

'The sort of man you would expect in an appointment where promotion goes by brutality. A drunken bully without mercy who soaks himself with vodka to drown his conscience. His anger falls on everyone, and includes his own soldiers. He carries a sword and strikes people with the flat of it when he is in the mood.'

'I wonder somebody doesn't bump him off,' growled Biggles, to Fritz. 'Ask Miskoff if he could take us to place where we could see the prisoners working. Before we can do anything we must know where your uncle is, and what he is doing.'

Fritz put the question and answered: 'Yes, he could take us to such a place, but it must be soon, because after he has killed Vostov he will go to his cave in the mountains.'

'When would be the best time?'

'To see the prisoners who work at the mine the best time would be at daybreak. The prisoners work every day. He can take us to a spot from which, without being seen ourselves, we could see the prisoners march past. He says he sometimes stands there himself to count how many of those he knew when he was in prison are still alive.'

'How far away is this place? I mean, how long will it take us to get there?'

'Half an hour.'

'Then how about meeting here tomorrow morning a little before sunrise?'

'Yes. He says he will be waiting,' answered Fritz, having put the question.

'Is there any chance of our being seen by people living in the other houses?'

After a brief conversation with the Russian Fritz said: 'As you are working against the prison you need have no fear of them. They all hate the soldiers. They would not give you shelter for fear of losing their lives, for the punishment for helping a prisoner is death. But they would not betray you.'

'Can we help Miskoff in any way? We could bring him some food if he would take care to put it where it would not be seen by anyone.'

'He says it is a long time since he tasted tea or sugar,' translated Fritz.

'He shall have some. And, if he wishes, some biscuits.'

'The only cereal he has seen in years is black rye bread.'

'All right. We'll bring the things when we come in the morning.'

'They would help him to live while he is in hiding after killing Vostov,'

informed Fritz. 'He has a good supply of dried fish.'

'Very well. We'd better be getting along. Tell him we shall be back here in the morning.'

Fritz did so, and with that they set off on the return journey to the machine. Looking back they saw the Russian walking slowly towards the empty shack.

'A strange, strange man,' said Biggles.

'No. I would say he is typical of his type,' answered Fritz. 'I have met some of these Eastern Russians. They don't think as we do. They have no fear of death. I suppose their environment has made them what they are.'

'That goes for everybody,' asserted Biggles. 'This meeting with Miskoff may not be all to the good,' he went on pensively, as they made their way through the gathering gloom. 'True, the fact of our getting to know him has been helpful — so far; but if he kills Vostov while we are still here there's bound to be a hue and cry that won't make our task any easier. I suppose it would be no use trying to persuade him not to kill Vostov? Pre-meditated murder is never justifiable.'

'He wouldn't listen,' declared Fritz. 'To him the killing of Vostov would not be murder as we understand it. It would be normal behaviour. In his eyes he would merely be a coward if he failed to do what has become a solemn duty. You can see that the death of the man, who he has reason to hate, is the one object left in his life. The only alternative would be for him to kill himself.'

'Why is he so keen to use a messy tool like an axe?'

'He has no other weapon.'

'Well, since he has offered to help us I suppose we can't complain. In any event it isn't for us to judge him, anyway.'

It was dark by the time they reached the Otter, to find the others in a state of acute anxiety over their long absence.

Biggles told them the reason for it.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT ONE MAN CAN DO

THE stars were dying one by one before the advance of the ever-conquering dawn when, the following morning taking with them the promised provisions. Biggles, Ginger and Fritz, set off for their rendezvous with Ivan Miskoff, the grief-stricken Russian now bent on revenge.

As a matter of detail Biggles had intended taking only Fritz with him, but Ginger had pleaded to be allowed to go with them, arguing that it would be wise, in case of accident, for another member of the party to see all that Miskoff could show them, and possibly act as a messenger between Biggles and those who were remaining behind. To this Biggles had agreed.

The usual precautions were taken as they made their way under a slowly lightening sky along the track, with the forest still in inky darkness on their left and the silhouettes of the mountains beginning to take shape. The air was keen with a touch of frost in it.

They found Miskoff waiting in the dim half-light, his axe on his belt, for, as he had told Fritz, ex-prisoners were forbidden under pain of death to possess firearms — not that it was normally possible for these to be obtained. To Ginger he presented a pathetic spectacle as he stood by a mound of freshly turned earth, at one end of which had been erected a rough wooden cross, obviously the grave of the woman who, by sharing his solitude, had made existence bearable.

He accepted the groceries with a short word of thanks and hid them under a tree, covering them with fir needles. Then, raising a beckoning finger he strode off into the forest on a line parallel with the shore of the estuary. It was clearly a way well known to him, for although he wound a sinuous course through the trees he seemed never at a loss for direction.

A walk of some twenty minutes brought them to within the reek of wood smoke, and presently the source of it could be seen through the trees; another poverty-stricken dwelling such as the one occupied by the man leading them. He made a detour round it. Later, two others were passed in the same way. An occasional glimpse between the trees revealed that the estuary had been left behind and that they were now following the river itself. It was not very wide, perhaps thirty yards, with the rushes, except for small groups, having given way to mossy rocky banks. It did not look very deep except at some ominous-looking pools. Occasionally a gravel bottom could be seen. In such places the water ran swiftly. There were bends where the banks had been undercut, presumably by the spates when the summer sun thawed the frost-bound ground at higher levels.

They were still in fir forest, which seemed endless, although there were a few patches of birch. The ground on their side of the river was becoming

more rugged, ridged rather than undulating, with tiny ice-fringed rivulets feeding the main stream. Reaching the top of an escarpment Miskoff stopped. He spoke not a word, but with an outstretched finger indicated all that words could have conveyed.

Before them, not more than a quarter of a mile away, on a flat eminence from which the trees had been cleared, stood a grim, grey stone building of massive proportions. It looked what it was. A prison. The prison of Onor. The forbidding gateway, with its great double doors closed, faced them. From it paths radiated out like the spokes of a wheel. Some ran directly to the edge of the forest, where a tangle of freshly lopped branches showed that trees were being felled. One, broader than the rest apparently from constant use, ended some way off at a collection of wooden buildings with stacks of squared timber adjacent. This, clearly, was the sawmill to which Miskoff had referred. Another broad track struck diagonally down a gentle slope to disappear round a shrub-covered shoulder of earth. Taking the landscape as a whole a more dreary scene would have been difficult to visualize.

Biggles nudged Fritz and pointed: 'Ask him where that track leads.'

Fritz put the question and replied: 'To the mine and the railway.'

Biggles looked surprised. 'Railway? I didn't expect to find a railway here.'

After another short conversation with Miskoff Fritz explained: 'It's only a very narrow-gauge one, with small iron trucks which sometimes come to take the coal and timber to where they are required.'

Miskoff resumed the march, now keeping well inside the forest for it was daylight. He walked with an assurance which made it clear he was familiar with his surroundings. For a time they lost sight of the prison. When next they saw it, as they returned to the river, it was away to their right and their view was from a different angle.

The reason why Miskoff had brought them to this particular spot was not apparent. The track to the face of the opencast coal workings, having rounded the shoulder of the hill, had dropped to the level of the river, which it followed for a little way, on the opposite bank, of course, at a distance of not more than thirty yards from where they stood. It then turned away again towards the workings. And this was not all. Close at hand was a chaos of rocks, piled up as if they might have been the result of a landslide. With weeds and young trees sprouting from the cracks between them this made an ideal spot from which to watch the track. By a signal Miskoff indicated this was the intention, so choosing their places, where there was no possibility of being seen, they settled down to wait.

'Ask him which is the best way of crossing the river, because it looks as if we shall have to, sooner or later,' requested Biggles.

Fritz obliged. 'There is a ford in front of us. Also there is an old wooden footbridge lower down. We didn't see it as we came here because of the detour we made in the forest.'

Presently Miskoff spoke again in a low voice to Fritz, who passed on the

information.

‘He says my uncle may not be working at the coal. He may be at the saw mill. But if he goes to the mine, from here we shall see him. We must wait. It will not be for long. This is about the time the prisoners pass.’

This information turned out to be correct, for had only been in position for a few minutes when round the shoulder of the hill, from the direction of the prison, marching along the track came a ‘crocodile’ of human beings. There was no difficulty in distinguishing between the prisoners and their guards, for, of course, they walked apart, and the guards carried either rifles or whips. All wore uniforms: the guards, a dark grey military service dress, and the prisoners, work-stained dungarees, black with yellow stripes, which made them conspicuous and was obviously intended to mark them for what they were should they escape. They walked in a double line. Some of the men carried tools. Ginger counted them and made the number twenty-nine. There were twelve guards armed with rifles, and two with whips, which they cracked from time to time as they were herding cattle. ‘Who are these prisoners?’ Biggles asked Fritz.

Fritz replied. ‘Most of them are habitual criminals.’

Biggles nodded understanding. Nothing more was said as the miserable cavalcade approached that part of the track nearest to them. The men marched in silence. The only sound was the steady plod of their feet on the muddy track.

It now seemed to Ginger, as he watched through a cranny, that it was not going to be easy to pick out von Stalhein even if he was there. Not only were the prisoners all dressed alike but they were similar in other respects. Their hair was long and their faces unshaven. Many wore rough beards which, with their hair, left only a small part of the face exposed. As Ginger’s eyes ran over them he found it hard to believe that the immaculate Prussian officer could look like one of these miserable wretches in any circumstances; and he had, in fact, decided that he was not there, when he noticed a man who walked with a limp. He remembered that von Stalhein limped slightly from an old wound. He stared at the man. The thought that this filthy creature might be the man they sought shocked him. There seemed to be a slight resemblance, notably in the upright figure.

Confirmation that it was von Stalhein came in a way that was as dramatic as it was unexpected.

Just at the moment when the files of men were as close to the watchers as they would ever be a voice said in English with an American accent: ‘This is it. I’ve had enough.’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ said another voice, and there was no mistaking the curt, clipped manner of speech. Only von Stalhein could have spoken like that. The words came from the man who limped.

In the events that followed Ginger was too shaken to wonder who the first speaker might be, or what he meant by his remark, although the explanation

was soon forthcoming. One of the guards who carried a whip hurried along the line and shouting what was evidently an order, perhaps for silence, struck him a brutal blow across the back. The effect on the victim, who was carrying a new shovel on his shoulder, was anything but what might have been expected. He spun round in a flash, and wielding the shovel as if it had no more weight than a walking stick, brought it down with all his force on the head of his assailant. Then, even before the falling guard had reached the ground he had dropped the shovel and was streaking for the river. Knowing only too well what would follow his action he did not keep a straight line, but zig-zagged like a startled snipe. Shots rang out. Bullets whistled as they ripped the earth, whined as they struck rock, lashed into the trees.



He zig-zagged like a startled snipe (page 89)

The fugitive raced on. He seemed to have a charmed life, although admittedly he was not an easy mark to hit. He reached the river, which here had a gravel bottom and was evidently the ford, as the runner must have known, or observed. Anyhow, it was not deep enough for swimming so he

blundered through it in a cloud of spray. Once he stumbled, and Ginger, who was holding his breath, thought he had been struck. But no. He was on his feet again in an instant, wisely plunging downstream instead of against the current, which was lucky for the spellbound watchers, for this took him farther from the rocks behind which they crouched. Reaching the bank the fugitive hurled himself over it, rolled two or three times flat on the ground, leapt to his feet and darted into the forest where he disappeared from sight. A hail of bullets followed him, to tear splinters from the trees.

‘My gosh!’ breathed Biggles. ‘I believe he’s done it. He deserved to. I never saw a finer effort. Don’t move, anyone.’

The other prisoners had of course halted. There was a babble of tongues. Guards shouted. In the general confusion another man tried to bolt, but he was unlucky, and perhaps foolish in that he ran in a straight line. A bullet brought him down before he had gone ten yards. This added chaos to confusion. Rifles covered the remainder. Whips were brandished and they were mustered into a group. The N.C.O. in charge of the guards was raging like a man demented. One of his men raced back over the track towards the prison. Four others crossed the river on the trail of the runaway, with small hope of finding him, Ginger thought, provided he had not been wounded. Now that the prisoners were standing still, huddled in a group, it was not possible to distinguish von Stalhein.

As for Biggles’ party they squatted motionless among their rocks, still with shock, and, as far as Ginger was concerned, with the perishing cold.

The prison bell began a dismal tolling, presumably to warn everyone of the escape. Search parties appeared, fanning out towards the forest.

Biggles said softly to Ginger: ‘If they come on us we shall have to try to shoot our way out. I’ll not risk being captured.’

The guard who had run to the prison returned, apparently with a message, for the N.C.O. shouted more orders. The prisoners were reformed in lines and their march to the mine was resumed. The guard who had been struck with the shovel, his head bandaged, made his way slowly to the prison. Only the dead prisoner lay where he had fallen.

Fritz touched Biggles on the arm. ‘Miskoff says this is the time to go,’ he said.

‘I’d think so, too,’ returned Biggles.

‘Miskoff says he will take us a roundabout way to the hut so that we do not meet any soldiers.’

‘Good.’

The Russian set off at a pace so fast that it took the others all their time to keep up with him. He kept this up for some time before settling down to a steadier stride — always, of course, in the forest.

‘Well, at least we found out what we wanted to know,’ said Biggles, as, with a good distance between them and the danger zone, they were able to breathe more freely.

‘My uncle was there,’ said Fritz, with tears in his eyes. ‘I saw him. I heard him speak. I know his voice. We must save him.’

‘Give us time,’ answered Biggles. ‘That wasn’t the moment, although it might have been had we known what was going to happen. But who could have foreseen a situation like that?’

‘That man who got away spoke like an American,’ put in Ginger.

‘So I noticed,’ replied Biggles. ‘I’m wondering if it could be the man Colonel Bradfield spoke to me about — an army pilot named Pat Manton. But it’s no use guessing about that. All I can say, is, I never saw a more desperate effort. It shows what one man can do if he’s prepared to back his luck against his life. He deserved to get away with it. I don’t mind telling you now I was scared stiff he would make for the rocks behind which we were hiding and so bring the whole pack on top of us. I’m glad he got clear although that may put us on a spot in that the searchers, working along the side of the estuary, may come on the Otter. Apart from that, with the forest stiff with soldiers it’s going to be difficult for us to move about.’

Silence fell again, and a little later the party reached a landmark, two fallen trees, which told Ginger they were in the vicinity of Miskoff’s house. Presently the Russian stopped, saying through Fritz that he would now go on alone to make sure it was safe for them to proceed. All houses would be searched for the escaped prisoner, he explained. That included his own, and as some of the soldiers might be mounted, and would take the direct route, they might already be there.

Biggles, who would have liked to push on to the machine as fast as possible, could raise no objection to this. So there they stood while Miskoff, who seemed tireless, strode on through the trees making no more noise than a shadow.

Speaking softly Biggles said: ‘I would very much like to find that American no matter who he is. He might be able to tell us in what part of the prison von Stalhein lives, although from what Miskoff says it looks as if our best chance of making contact with him would be when he is out with a working party. When the American shouted ‘This is it’, before making his dash, he must have known there was someone in the gang who could speak English, which suggests he had previously spoken to von Stalhein, otherwise I don’t see how he could have known that. A prisoner here able to speak English must be rare. I fancy he intended to make a break, anyway, but when that lout hit him with a whip he lost his temper and lashed out with the shovel. After that he had to bolt. He had nothing to lose, because he would probably have been shot, anyway, for striking a guard.’

‘There seems to be a poor chance of us getting into the prison, or getting anyone out of it,’ returned Ginger, morosely. ‘Ten men in one cell raises problems. I mean, you couldn’t take one man out and leave the others. They’d all want to come, and you’d be landed with the entire bunch.’

‘I hadn’t overlooked that,’ returned Biggles. ‘That’s why I’m trying to

work out some way of getting in touch with von Stalhein when he's outside. If the whole gang made a break and took to the forest at the same time so much the better. The guards would be faced with a bigger job than hunting a single man.'

They all sprang to the alert as from somewhere there came a sudden outcry. It lasted only two or three seconds and ended as abruptly as it had started.

'Now what?' muttered Biggles. 'There's somebody there besides Miskoff. He may be in trouble. We'd better have a look.'

With the others keeping close he began a slow advance through the trees.

CHAPTER 8

A PILOT IS LUCKY

THE little clearing, with Miskoff's house in the middle of it, came into view. Miskoff was there, standing in the open. With him was another man dressed in the unsightly prison garb. He had a black eye and a cut on his forehead was bleeding. They were gesticulating as if trying to talk in sign language. Lying on the ground, his rifle beside him, was a burly figure in the uniform of the prison guards. He did not move.

'So that's it,' said Biggles tersely, and strode forward. One glance at the man on the ground was enough.

The escaped prisoner spoke first. 'You looking for me?'

'No, but I'm glad we've found you,' answered Biggles. 'Are you the man we saw make a break this morning?'

'Sure. You saw that?'

'We did. Congratulations.'

'Thanks.'

Biggles pointed to the man on the ground. 'Who did this?'

The prisoner jerked a thumb at Miskoff. 'He did.'

'He's dead?'

'I guess he'll never be deader.'

'Let's not stand talking here in case some more of 'em come along.'

Biggles walked on into the trees.

The others all followed.

'First of all,' said Biggles, speaking to the prisoner, 'you're an American, aren't you?'

'Yep.'

'Is your name Manton, by any chance?'

'Sure. That's me. How did you know?'

'We heard in Japan that you were missing and it was thought you might have crash-landed on Sakhalin. In fact, Colonel Bradfield, one of your Intelligence officers, asked us to keep an eye open for you.'

'My motor packed up. I hit the water well outside territorial waters. A patrol boat picked me up and brought me here. After that it was the same old story. They'd no right to hold me, but they claimed I was a spy, and, well, you saw what they did with me. You don't talk like an American.'

'I'm not. We're British. Lowenhardt here is German.'

'There was a German in my gang. I told him I was going to make a break. He said it was crazy. I'd never do it.'

'His name's von Stalhein?'

'Sure. That's the guy. What are you doing?'

'Before we go into that tell me what happened here.'

‘I was heading along the waterfront looking for a boat. I reckoned if I could get any sort of craft I could make Japan. It isn’t all that far. I’ve seen the layout of this area from the air. I was in a hurry, too, to find a boat before they were all put under guard. Those I’ve seen were all on the other side of the water. It’s too cold for swimming. I’d never, been along here before. I saw this house and decided, if there was no one at home, to borrow something to cover up this outfit I’m wearing. There didn’t seem to be anyone around so I went in. Before I had time to do anything I heard someone arrive outside. I came out reckoning it was the owner, instead of which it was one of the guards. He coshed me with his rifle and then beat me up with it till I was too dizzy to think, let alone fight. I was about all in when this other guy steps up from behind. I was on the ground. That skunk of a guard was too busy kicking me to see anything else. I guess he never did know what hit him. One crack on the skull with that axe was enough. Who is this axe-swinger? I don’t talk his lingo.’

‘He’s an ex-prisoner, a Russian. He lives in this hut.’

‘You sure had a nerve, trusting him.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s a Russian, you say.’

‘What of it? You get good and bad eggs wherever you go. I’ve nothing against a Russian simply because he is a Russian. The people I don’t like are those who are running this place; and as far as that goes, Miskoff has even more reason to hate them than we have.’

‘I guess you’re right, at that,’ conceded Pat. ‘He sure hit that guard as though he enjoyed doing it.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me,’ said Biggles,

‘All the same, he took a chance, helping me, didn’t he?’

‘He was out for blood, anyway. Apart from doing ten years in the prison his wife died yesterday. There’s her grave. He holds the prison officials responsible, so he’ll shed no tears for the man he’s killed.’

‘Must have been a pleasure,’ stated Manton grimly. ‘I feel a bit that way myself.’

Miskoff said something to Fritz, who translated. ‘He says he helped the American because he thought he’d useful to you. If you don’t want him any more, he says he’ll set fire to the house and go to his cave in the forest.’

‘What about this body?’

‘He says he’ll dispose of it. We should go quickly in case any more guards come this way.’

Biggles looked at Manton. ‘You’d better come with us. Miskoff can probably exist in the forest, but you couldn’t hold out for long. You’d starve to death.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘We have a plane here. It’s hidden in the rushes.’

‘A plane! Say, that’s great news.’

‘You’re a bit conspicuous in that outfit. I wonder if Miskoff can do something about that. Fritz, ask him if he has any spare clothes — anything will do.’

Fritz spoke to Miskoff, and then said: ‘He has only the clothes he stands in, but he has an old skin overcoat you can have.’

‘That would be better than nothing,’ returned Biggles.

‘He wants to keep the rifle — the one carried by guard.’

‘If he wants it it’s his. He has more right to it than we have.’

Fritz passed on the information, whereupon Miskoff walked off, picked up the rifle and took it into the house. He came out carrying what looked like an old skin hearthrug, half bald, which turned out to be some ancient wolf skins roughly sewn together to make an overcoat. He handed it to Manton, who put it on. It was much too big for him, but it served its purpose, which was for disguise rather than warmth.

‘We’ll press on,’ decided Biggles. ‘Fritz, you might thank Miskoff for what he has done for us. Say if we can help him at any time while we’re here we shall be happy to do so. He knows roughly where we’re hiding so if he finds himself in need of food he has only to come along and whistle.’

With that Biggles set off. Miskoff’s deeply lined face was inscrutable as he watched them go.

‘He won’t go far away,’ predicted Fritz, ‘He’s determined to kill Vostov. When I asked him if another murder was really necessary, all he said was “This is Sakhalin”, whatever that might mean.’

‘He probably meant that murder here is the only way of settling scores,’ replied Biggles.

Ginger was still pale. ‘There’s something so cold-blooded about Miskoff that it gives me the creeps,’ he remarked. ‘You can see that murder means nothing to him. He was no more concerned about having brained that guard than if he had swatted a mosquito.’

‘Who are we to condemn him?’ queried Biggles. ‘If you’d spent ten years in the grey horror they call Onor maybe you’d feel as he does. Not that he feels anything, unless it’s satisfaction from having killed one of the blackguards who have made him what he is. You have only to look at his eyes to see he doesn’t think any more. Misery has emptied his head of everything except hate. To all intents and purposes he’s dead on his feet. The thing we have to remember is, if we’re caught here we may end up in the same state. Things are likely to start buzzing when that guard fails to return to barracks.’

‘They sure will,’ asserted Manton. ‘What are you guys doing here, anyhow? You’re sure sticking your necks out.’

‘We’re here to try to rescue von Stalhein,’ answered Biggles.

‘Friend of yours, huh?’

‘Not exactly a friend,’ murmured Biggles, dryly. ‘More often than not he’s been an enemy.’

Manton stared. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘I didn’t expect you would.’

‘I’ve been told you British can be dumb.’

‘We can, when it suits us,’ returned Biggles, smiling faintly. ‘I’ll tell you more about this business when we get to our ship.’

‘If you’re aiming to pick up von Stalhein, brother, all I can say is you’ve taken on something,’ declared Manton, grimly.

‘Are you telling us it’s impossible?’

‘I wouldn’t say that; but it isn’t far short. My getaway isn’t going to make things easier for you. They’ll reckon I bumped off that guard that Miskoff killed. Not that it matters as far as I’m concerned. I’d be for the high jump, anyway, if I’m caught, for bashing that whipper-in this morning with the shovel. I’ll see to it they don’t take me alive, you can betcha life on that, siree.’

‘It isn’t only you,’ retorted Biggles. ‘That goes for us too. You can imagine what they’d do to us if they caught us on their perishing island.’

‘You can say that again,’ murmured Manton, warmly. ‘This is no health resort at the best of times, but after what’s happened today it’s going to be no place for people like you and me.’

‘This is where we’ve tucked ourselves,’ informed Biggles, stopping by the rushes at the spot where the aircraft was moored.

Bertie appeared almost at once with the dinghy. ‘I was keeping an eye on the path and spotted you coming.’ He adjusted his monocle more firmly. ‘What-ho! Who have you collected?’

‘Manton.’

‘Jolly good. The more the merrier.’

‘What made you choose this place for a hideout?’ asked Manton, as Bertie paddled them to the plane.

‘Where else was there?’ returned Biggles. ‘I preferred this to the ice on the other side of the island, particularly as the ice might have started to break up for all I know. Have you anything against this for a mooring?’

‘No, except that the water here can be rough at times. But there’d be objections to any place within fifty miles of this bit of the Iron Curtain.’

‘Well, let’s have something to eat and then we’ll talk,’ suggested Biggles. ‘Did anything happen to worry you while we were away?’ he asked Algy.

‘Not a thing.’

‘Had your lunch?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you might keep watch while we have a bite. There was a rumpus this morning, what with Manton making a break and Miskoff braining one of the guards, so a patrol may come this way. I’ll tell you about that later. You’ll be able to hear what we say here.’

‘Okay.’

They made a hearty meal, the American eating ravenously like a man half-starved, as he assured them he was. Bertie had to boil two kettles of water to

satisfy his appetite for coffee.

‘Now let’s get down to brass tacks,’ said Biggles at last, handing round cigarettes. ‘First of all, Pat — you won’t mind if I call you that — which would you prefer? To push on with your scheme of pinching a boat, or taking your chance with us? Before you make up your mind I must warn you that it may be some time before we leave. You know what we came here to do.’

‘I’ll stick around with you if I may,’ decided Pat, without hesitation. ‘It’s something to be with pals and sniff gasoline again. It feels more like home.’

‘Okay. That settles that. Now tell me this. Knowing what you know, what would you say is our best chance of grabbing von Stalhein — while he’s in the prison or when he’s outside?’

‘Outside, without any argument.’

‘Can you think of any way I could make contact with von Stalhein before trying to get hold of him?’

‘What’s the idea of that?’

‘Two reasons. First, to let him know what’s afoot so that he’ll be ready when the time comes, and secondly, to make sure he’s willing to come with us.’

Pat’s eyebrows went up. ‘Come with you? Are you kidding? Why wouldn’t he come with you?’

‘He’s a queer fellow, with peculiar notions about likes and dislikes.’

‘He’d be more than queer to turn down a chance of quitting Onor. He’d be nuts.’

‘Maybe he is. But let that pass. Where would be the best place of getting in touch — if you had to do it?’

Pat thought for a moment. ‘I can think of only one place where it might be done and that’s at the coal face.’

‘What sort of place is that? I haven’t seen it.’

‘There’s no reason why you shouldn’t see it, from a distance, if you’re prepared to risk bumping into a patrol. The coal, pretty poor stuff, is a few feet under the round. A face has been opened about two to three hundred yards long. It looks like a low black cliff. In front of it, looking towards the face, are all the heaps of muck and dirt that has been cleared — stuff that’s no use. There are also heaps of coal dust from the screening. The stuff that’s wanted, the bigger pieces, are stacked in a line ready for loading.’

‘In other words, it’s a big untidy mess.’

‘Sure. Just like you’d imagine. I could take you there to see when the gang isn’t working.’

‘When would be the best time?’

‘Around dawn, before the gang arrives, or mebbe by moonlight.’

‘Do the working parties always go to the same place?’

‘More or less. Sometimes it’s necessary to work on top of the ground, beyond the face, cutting the trees and clearing the soil so that the face can go forward without a lot of rubbish falling on the coal that’s been exposed. Good

timber is hauled away by hand; the rest is burnt.'

'Tell me exactly what happens when the gang starts in the morning,' requested Biggles.

'First, there's a roll call in the prison yard, with the gang standing in a single line, covered by the guards. The prisoners are then formed two deep and marched to the gate. Some carry any new tools that are wanted, as I did this morning. The gate is opened and the gang marches off to the workings.'

'Is the gang always in the same order?'

'Yes. That's the result of the roll call. We take our places from the right in the order in which the names appear on the roll.'

'What happens when you get to the workings?'

'The gang is broken up and given its different tasks.'

'What I'm trying to get at is this,' explained Biggles. 'If the gang arrives in the same order every day the same men will be detailed for the job they were on the previous day.'

'More or less, unless there happens to be a change the routine.'

'So that if I saw where von Stalhein was working today I might reasonably expect to find him near the same place tomorrow.'

'Yes. But how would you get there?'

'I would already be there when the gang arrived, hidden on one of the coal dumps, or something.'

Pat stared. 'Holy alligators! That's taking a chance.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Whatever we do will mean taking a chance. We're taking a chance sitting here. That's why I don't want to be here longer than is necessary. Wherefore I suggest that provided there's no trouble in the meantime we go along tonight and have a look at the dump. I should be able to see in moonlight all I need to know, and there'd be less chance of our being seen than if we tried it in daylight.'

Pat agreed that this was so and thus the matter left.

There was now every reason to hope that the day would end without further cause for anxiety, but was not to be.

Just before sunset, Ginger, who was on watch, announced that a launch, which looked as if it might be a patrol boat, had rounded the headland on the far side of the estuary and was moving slowly along the coast, keeping closer in than was to be expected had it not a particular purpose in view.

'I'd say that's a coastal patrol boat,' opined Biggles after a long look at it. 'I'd say that its appearance here isn't merely a matter of chance. It's looking for something or somebody and we can guess what it is. The hunt for you, Pat, is on. Had you pinched a boat as you intended you wouldn't have got far. They'd have spotted you. I'll wager no more boats leave this river without being searched.'

'Thank goodness it isn't coming along this side, anyway,' said Algy.

Biggles did not answer, but remained in a position from which, peering between the rushes, he could keep an eye on the unwelcome visitor.

It held its course down the far side until it disappeared from sight behind a point not far from where the river flowed into the salt water, which was no great distance from where the fishing boats were tied up. The chugging of its engine still came faintly to their ears across the desolate expanse of water, now stained with the orange glow of the setting sun. Presently it reappeared, now cruising along their side, sending up clouds of ducks and geese that had roosted there.

‘I was afraid of that,’ muttered Biggles. ‘They’re going to do the job properly.’

‘They won’t be able to see much by the time they get here,’ asserted Ginger, optimistically. ‘It’ll be nearly dark, and they won’t dare to come too close in for fear of running ashore.’

‘Well, as there’s nothing we can do about it we shall just have to take our luck,’ stated Biggles.

‘How many people do you think there will be on board?’ asked Pat.

‘Bertie knows more about small craft than I do,’ replied Biggles. ‘What would you say, Bertie?’

‘Not more than half a dozen, old boy,’ conjectured Bertie. ‘Actually, a little job like that could be handled by a couple of men, a navigator at the wheel and an engineer type. Reckoning on two or three hands to keep watch there shouldn’t be more than four or five on board. Why did you want to know, Pat?’

‘I thought we might grab the boat and make a dash for Japan.’

‘Oh no,’ put in Biggles, promptly. ‘I came here to grab von Stalhein and I’m not going without him. I don’t care two hoots what that boat does as long as it keeps out of our way. I shan’t turn to piracy unless I have to.’

The launch came on through the fast fading light. As it drew nearer two figures could just be made out behind the glass screen that protected the wheel. A man stood in the bows, obviously acting as look-out. Another was standing nearer the stern, watching the shore.

Just before the launch drew level with the belt of rushes in which the Otter was concealed, and some fifty or sixty yards out from them, the note of its engine changed. Presently it stopped, and the launch came slowly to rest.

‘They’ve seen us,’ breathed Ginger.

‘I doubt it, in this light,’ returned Biggles.

An anchor chain rattled.

‘So that’s it,’ murmured Biggles. ‘Rather than risk running aground they’ve dropped their mudhook for the night. There wasn’t much point in them going on in the dark, anyhow.’

‘What stinking luck that with the whole estuary in front of them they should choose to park themselves here,’ muttered Ginger, irritably.

‘They probably chose this particular area for the same reason that I did,’ answered Biggles, evenly. ‘It happens to be protected from what wind there is. We shall have to talk in whispers or they may hear us. You know how

sound travels over water. Don't strike a match or show any sort of light, anyone. They've no idea we're here so they may push on at daybreak, or perhaps even when the moon comes up.'

'What about the plan for going to the workings?' asked Pat, softly.

'Let's wait to see what happens,' decided Biggles.

An uneasy silence fell.

CHAPTER 9

PREPARATIONS

TIME passed.

The launch put up a riding light and a narrow yellow glow from the cabin fell aslant the water. One or two scattered pin-points of light appeared in the far distance, on the opposite side of the estuary, to mark the homes of those who dwelt in a land where happiness was a thing more rare than gold.

From time to time a low murmur of voices reached those who sat in darkness in the cabin of the aircraft, but although Fritz listened intently they were too indistinct to convey the subject of the conversation. To Ginger it was a weird situation, more in the nature of a dream than reality. To Bertie it was an awful bore, and he said so. To Biggles it was a period of irritating anxiety, for while the launch remained in its present position nothing could be done. Moreover, there was always a possibility that, attracted by the light, a patrol would arrive on the waterside track. This did not necessarily mean it would discover the plane, but Biggles would have preferred not to have enemies as close as that.

Some time after midnight a new sound came from the launch to bring those who were dozing to the alert. It was the staccato buzzing of radio morse. Fritz could not read morse, and as those who did could speak no Russian, the instrument might as well have remained silent as far as those in the Otter were concerned.

Whether or not this signal was responsible for what happened next there was of course no means of knowing. Not that it mattered in the least, as Biggles was the first to point out when sudden activity on the launch suggested that it might be going to move. The anchor could be heard coming up. The engine was started, seeming to make an astonishing amount of noise after the long silence. The boat was turned about, making a gentle swell that brought a rustle of protest from the disturbed rushes, and then set off on a straight course across the estuary.

‘Thank goodness for that,’ said Ginger, with a sigh of relief.

They watched the launch vanish round the point from which it had appeared.

‘Jolly good,’ said Bertie. ‘Now I know how a mouse feels with a cat outside its sitting-room.’

Biggles, who had sat deep in thought through the long silence, lit a cigarette. ‘That’s better,’ he observed, taking a deep draw. ‘When I’ve finished this we’ll move off and have a look at this coal mine affair. I’d better tell you all exactly what I have in mind, then you’ll be able to keep pace with things. If I can find a suitable place to hide within speaking distance of where von Stalhein is working, having warned him that friends are near, I shall tell

him what we intend to do.'

'Is that necessary?' asked Fritz.

'Yes. I feel it would be too haphazard to spring it on him suddenly and then, almost in the same breath, expect him to fall in with what we are doing. He's going to have a shock, anyway, when he hears my name, your voice; but knowing what his nerve is like I shall reckon on him remaining calm. If he knew, well before any attempt to escape was made, where we were and what we hoped to do, he'd be ready to spring into action the instant I gave the word to go. Being forewarned might even be able to put himself in the best position for the break when the moment comes. It would certainly be a great advantage if he knew the drill from the outset. The difference between knowing and not knowing we were there could decide the success or failure of scheme. For that reason I think it's worth trying.'

'How are you going to get away after you've made contact with him — or even if you don't?' asked Ginger.

'I should have to wait until the gang packed up and went back to the prison. Obviously I wouldn't be able to move while there were guards about.'

'But that means you'd be stuck in the hide all day!'

'Of course. There's no getting away from that. With a flask of coffee and a biscuit I should be able to hold out. We can talk about that later. For the moment I want to have a good look at the ground. That will be enough to go on with.'

'Who are you taking with you on this preliminary recce?' inquired Algy.

'I'd like Pat to come with me to show me over the place.'

'Sure. That's okay with me,' agreed Pat.

'And it might be a good thing if Fritz came along to do any talking should we bump into anyone. In any event, as I shall have to ask him to stay with me in the hide, to speak to his uncle, he ought to know every inch of the ground. The rest of you will have to wait here.'

'You might take me along,' suggested Ginger. 'There's nothing for me to do here and you may need a spare hand to do some job or other.'

'Just as you like,' agreed Biggles. 'If you're so determined to look for trouble you can follow us, so that should things go wrong you could double home and give the gen to Algy and Bertie.' He stubbed his cigarette with care. 'Okay,' he went on. 'Let's move off. You'd better wear your fancy overcoat, Pat, to cover your zebra suit. You may need it, anyway. It'll be chilly outside.'

Bertie took them ashore in the dinghy, and after a close scrutiny of the track had shown it to be deserted, the party set off in single file, Pat leading and Ginger bringing up the rear. They moved slowly, keeping close against the trees, ready to dive under them at the first sign of danger, and stopping to listen at frequent intervals. In such conditions in hostile country nerves are always at full stretch, and when with a crash and a grunt a bear, that may have been fishing, blundered out of the rushes into the forest Ginger's heart jumped into his mouth, as the saying is. He could hear the animal for some time as it

scrambled up the hillside.

Soon after this they stopped when to their nostrils came the reek of wood-smoke. When the party had closed up Biggles whispered: 'It's coming from Miskoff's house. It's just round the next bend. He must still be there, unless he's done what he said he would do — burn it down. Let's see.'

They went on, taking even greater care not to make a sound, and presently, peering through the trees, saw from a heap of smouldering ashes that the unhappy Russian had carried out his intention of destroying his home. Ginger noticed that the body of the dead guard had gone.

As they stood gazing at the glowing ashes, and were in fact about to move on, there came a sound that froze them in their tracks.

There was no mistaking it. Somewhere in the darkness a horse had shaken its head, causing its bridle to jingle. There was no other sound. It was not repeated. From exactly where it had come Ginger found it impossible to judge. Surrounding the little clearing was the black wall of forest forming a pit too deep for the moon to reach the bottom although it painted the pointed spires of the firs with silvery grey. The only light was the dull crimson glow of the smouldering embers, and this was too weak to reach more than a few feet from the ruin.

Biggles stood motionless, as did the others, each aware that if a harnessed horse was there its rider would not be far away. Miskoff did not own a horse, so such a man could only be an enemy.

Seconds dragged by to merge into minutes, and Ginger, his eyes striving to probe the dark recesses of the glade, was beginning to feel the strain when what they were all waiting for happened. A voice spoke. A man's voice, sharply and clearly. This was followed by the creak of leather accoutrements. Against the hard background of the trees vague shadows moved, and into the open, each leading a horse, came two men. Standing in silhouette against the dying ashes of the fire they mounted, and moving off at a walk were lost in the gloom in the direction of the track.

Not until the soft thud of hooves and the squeaks of harness had faded into the distance did Biggles speak. Then it was to Fritz. 'Did you catch what that man said?'

'Yes. He said it was no use waiting any longer; he wasn't coming back.'

'Meaning Miskoff.'

'I suppose so. Who else could he have meant?'

'Apparently they're looking for him, Pat, as well as for you,' said Biggles, softly. 'This shows how careful we shall have to be. We might have walked into those two Cossacks. But I think it's safe for us to move on now — I mean, as safe as it will ever be.'

They continued on along the track, moving with even more circumspection than before. To Ginger there was something dreadfully sinister about the whole business. And when, after a while, Pat took to the forest, it was uncomfortable as well. The purpose of this was to make a detour round the

dwelling which they knew occurred along the river bank. Eventually, when they returned to the river some distance higher up, it had, as they were already aware, narrowed considerably.

Ginger, knowing that the workings were on the other side, was afraid they would have to swim or at least wade through the ice-cold water, and was mightily relieved when Pat reminded them of the old wooden footbridge, mentioned by Miskoff, a little farther on. They went along to it, and found it spanning the river at its narrowest point and on the downstream side of the place where Pat had made his dash to escape. Because the river was narrow there it was also deep, he said. As for the bridge itself it was an ancient wooden pedestrian crossing in such a state of disrepair that it looked anything but safe. Pat said he had never seen anyone using it, although that may have been because the civilian population, such as it was, had no business at the workings. Those at the dwellings nearer the river mouth used boats if they wished to cross.

Biggles had a good look at the bridge, remarking that this would be their line of retreat should they have to retire in a hurry; and while it might be all right to cross in slow time it was as well to know where they were putting their feet should they have to take it at a run. He pointed out that several slats were missing, and the bridge itself had tilted to an angle as a result of the collapse of one of the two central supports. The bridge was a double span, and the supports were merely untrimmed wooden posts.

They crossed over one at a time, Ginger with some trepidation, for the bridge swayed even under his slight weight. He had no fear of being drowned; the river was too narrow for that; but the thought of a plunge in the icy water, with no change of clothes, was more than somewhat disconcerting. However, they all got across safely and after a walk of about three hundred yards, there before them, bathed in cold moonlight, were the so-called workings. In broad terms they were as Pat had described them. The track leading to them from the prison, which they had seen before, passed close to the spot where they were standing. The prison itself showed as a great square mass on the skyline.

‘This is it,’ said Pat.

‘Keep your eyes open, everyone, while I have a look at this,’ requested Biggles.

He then made a long and careful study of the landscape, moving slowly towards the workings, surveying the terrain from every angle and examining everything closely, even to the vegetation that grew on the lonely waste. He pointed to some dwarf birches, growing in lumps and following the course of the river. ‘They might come in useful for cover,’ he remarked.

The low hill between the prison and the actual workings was found to be covered with a coarse, tight-growing mat of scrubby rhododendron which, east of the Ural Mountains, replaces the heather common to the West. Amongst it were old stumps and the dead loppings of the trees when they were cut; and this probably explained why the track from the prison made a

diversion round the base of the hill rather than cross it direct, which would have been shorter. The track took a longer but easier way to avoid the obstacles.

‘This stuff would burn like Old Nick,’ observed Biggles, thoughtfully.

‘Say, you’re not thinking of setting fire to it!’ exclaimed Pat, in a startled voice.

‘Not at the moment, if that’s what you mean,’ answered Biggles. ‘But on a job of this sort it’s a good thing to note the possibilities of any natural features which might be used to advantage. If this hill was on fire it’d make a lovely lot of smoke.’

They went on nearer to the actual coal face, a long black scar in the manner of a quarry extending for nearly a quarter of a mile and varying in height from ten to twenty feet. There were places where the face had collapsed, or had perhaps been blasted, to form scree by which the top could be reached. The ground at the foot of this low cliff, which marked the bottom limit of the coal, was muddy from the trampling of the workers.

On all sides there were heaps of such unwanted stuff as soil, peat and turves, apparently the original top which could not easily be disposed of by burning until they had been thoroughly dried by the sun and winds of summer. The good coal that had been won was built into rectangular stacks, at intervals and more or less in a straight line beside a roughly laid set of rails. There also heaps of slack, or dross, where coal had screened. Wheelbarrows, picks, shovels and other tools had been piled where the labourers had finished previous day’s work. Some distance beyond the face was fir forest that had not yet been cleared.

In short, the place looked exactly what it was, open-cast coal working such as Pat had done his best to describe.

‘Where exactly were you working the last time you were here?’ Biggles asked him.

Pat pointed. ‘Over there. I was hewing coal from the face.’

‘And where was von Stalhein?’

‘There.’ Again Pat pointed.

‘What was he doing?’

‘Wheeling out the coal from that big fall and stacking it. That’s the stack he was working on, building an outside wall of the very large pieces.’

‘Would you have expected to continue the same jobs the next day?’

‘Yes.’

‘How could you be so sure?’

‘Because we were told to leave our tools where they were.’

‘How were the guards arranged?’

‘They generally walk up and down, two or three along the top of the face to prevent anyone from making a dash for the forest, and the rest behind us.’

Biggles walked on to a big mound of turves and other rubbish, obviously the top layer of earth that had covered the coal now being mined. ‘Between

that part of the coal face where you were working, and the place where von Stalhein was stacking it, I take it he would have to pass close to this heap of muck,' he suggested.

'Sure. Every time. First with his barrow loaded and then back to me with it empty,' replied Pat.

'Good.' Biggles walked slowly round the heap of rubbish examining it closely. 'This ought to suit us,' he decided.

'Do you mean you're going to bury yourself in *that*?' asked Ginger.

'Not exactly bury myself,' answered Biggles. 'Let us say sit inside it. As a hide it's ready-made for the job. We can make a cavity and you can pile the turves up around us until it looks as it does now. Only we shall be inside it — that is, me and Fritz.'

'To squat here, surrounded by armed guards as you will be, seems taking a frightful risk,' murmured Ginger.

'Not such a risk as trying to break into the prison,' argued Biggles. 'I don't expect to be comfortable, but I can think of no better way of letting von Stalhein know we're here.'

'I guess you're right,' put in Pat. 'I can't see you getting into that pen, and if you did you'd never get out.'

'Okay. Then let's get on with the job,' said Biggles.

He hesitated as an icy breeze, slight but with the edge of a razor blade, came in from the direction of the sea. He looked at the sky. A thin scud was drifting across the face of the moon. 'I'm afraid there's going to be a change in the weather,' he observed. 'The wind is coming from the east, straight into the estuary. I fancy it could be rough when it's in the mood. I had my fingers crossed for the weather to hold until we were ready to pull off. However, let's get on.' He turned back to the mound.

'Do you want me to stay here with you?' asked Pat, as they set to work.

'No, thanks. That would make too much of a crowd. I expect we shall be a bit cramped as it is. As soon as we're inside you go back with Ginger to the aircraft. We shall join you as soon as we can.'

'Okay.'

The task confronting them was fairly simple and it did not take long. In twenty minutes Biggles and Fritz were seated on a low heap of turves inside the mound with the others piling up more turves to enclose them completely.

'Pack them as tightly as you can so that there's no chance of them falling,' ordered Biggles. 'You'll have to leave a crack or two here and there so that we can see what goes on outside.'

Grey dawn was staining the sky by the time the job was done to Biggles' satisfaction. A few last words and Ginger and Pat hurried off to get clear before day broke.

Biggles reached for the vacuum flask which, with a packet of biscuits, had been put inside with them. 'We might as well have our breakfast now,' he suggested. 'That will save us moving after the gang arrives.'

CHAPTER 10

CLOSE WORK IN COLD BLOOD

NOTHING is more futile than to speculate on what *might* have happened had events gone otherwise than they did, but one of the most popular preoccupations is for people to torment themselves by saying: if I had done this, or if I hadn't done that, this or that might never have happened. If it has happened, not all the laments in the world will alter it. A similar form of self-torture, but one which can sometimes be entertaining, is to trace what tremendous consequences have resulted in an incident so trivial in itself that not by any stretch of the imagination could the effect have been foreseen. The two things often go together.

Such thoughts as these occurred to Biggles as sitting huddled inside his hide he sipped his coffee and allowed his mind to run over all that had happened since the arrival of the Otter at Sakhalin. If he had not done this, or that, he would not now be sitting, very uncomfortable, inside a heap of muddy clods, waiting for the dawn of the day that might well turn out to be his last.

He knew from long experience that a plan, however carefully made, is liable to break down from the intrusion of factors which no amount of thought could anticipate; and once that happens things usually take their own course, leading the planner even further from his original intention. All that can then be done is to deal with each new phase as it arises and, if possible, turn it to advantage. Which was, of course, what Biggles had done.

The position in which he now found himself did not occur in his scheme. He could not have visualized it the outset. It had been forced on him by circumstances beyond his imagination and he was trying to make the best use of them.

First there had been the meeting with Miskoff, a Russian whose hatred of his own people was such he was now prepared to help their enemies. There nothing unique about this. Such revulsions of feeling have happened often enough, and will doubtless continue to happen while men inflict injustice on each other. That they should encounter such a strange creature so soon after their arrival was a factor outside reasonable expectation.

Then there was Pat. It was known that the American pilot might be on the island although there was evidence of this; but that they should meet him in manner so dramatic could never seriously have been contemplated. Both these men were now involved in the operation, whether for better or worse remained to be seen. So far so good. Both had served a useful purpose, offset to some extent by the fact that the prison authorities were now on the alert.

What, Biggles wondered, would be the next unexpected factor to raise its head to switch his plan in a different direction?

He was soon to know. And it was revealed by sound before it came into

sight.

They were watching for the gang to appear out of the cold morning light when to Biggles' ears came a noise which, while vaguely familiar, he could not at first identify. He thought, and hoped, it had nothing to do with his programme. But when the head of the column of prisoners came into sight he saw at once from the way the men walked what had happened. He recognized the sound for what it was. The rattle of chains.

'Spare my days!' he breathed. 'They've been shackled. What a blow! I'm afraid that's torn it.'

'To prevent any more escapes,' said Fritz, bitterly. 'A man can't run with chains on his legs.'

Biggles fell silent. Here was the unexpected with a vengeance. What Fritz had said was true. They couldn't hope to get von Stalhein away while his ankles were joined with eighteen inches of chain. Admittedly he could walk, but he certainly wouldn't be able to run. Nonplussed, Biggles could only stare through his selected aperture between the turves. He could see only six guards. Two went to the top of the coal face, from where they could look down on the prisoners. The other four remained below, spaced at fairly wide intervals.

'I'll tell you what's happened,' guessed Biggles. 'Every guard that can be spared has been turned out to search for Pat. With a reduced number on duty here they're afraid more prisoners would make a dash for it, so they've shackled them. A man trying his luck wouldn't have a hope in leg irons.'

'How can they work like that?'

'I don't know. I suppose they'll have to try. But that's beside the point. All that matters is, your uncle is chains, and that presents a problem I see no way of solving at the moment.'

'Here he comes now,' muttered Fritz. '*Mein Gott!*' he went on, in his emotion lapsing into his own tongue. 'Look at him! I ask you to look at him!'

Biggles was already staring at the man who had for so long been his enemy. To say that he was shocked at the change, now that he could observe him closely, would be to say little. Compassion banished enmity. Had he not known von Stalhein was there he would not have recognized him. His hair was grey, long and matted; his face, unshaven, thin and drawn in deep lines. His normally erect figure was bent and emaciated. His rags of clothes were filthy, as were the hands that now closed on the wheelbarrow. His appearance revealed more clearly than words could have done what he had been through, and was still going through.

Biggles looked at Fritz with an expression that conveyed not only horror and sympathy, but amazement. 'Heavens above!' he grated, tight-lipped, 'What sort of devils do they have in that prison to treat a man like that, no matter what he's done?'

'I told you,' said Fritz, simply, with tears in his eyes. 'They are all bad men. That's why they are sent here. This place has the reputation of being

worse than Siberia, and no one willingly goes there.'

'Don't worry, Fritz. We'll get him out,' declared Biggles, in a voice that had iron in it.

The prisoners, under orders shouted by the guards, were now taking up their working positions, and greatly to Biggles' relief, for his great fear now was that there might be a change, von Stalhein went on with his previous task as Pat had predicted. Resting the wheelbarrow he began loading it from a heap of loose coal at the scree from which it had fallen.

'Don't try to speak to him while he's there,' warned Biggles. 'He wouldn't hear you unless you spoke loudly enough for others to hear. Wait till he comes past.'

'Will you speak first or shall I?' asked Fritz.

'You speak.'

'The first time he passes?'

'Yes. Don't try to say too much. Just let him know you're here. That should give him hope, if nothing more. I'll warn you if a guard comes dangerously close.'

Actually, at this juncture the nearest guard, rifle under his arm, had stopped by a group of prisoners some twenty-five or thirty yards away. The men, using picks and shovels, were making a fair amount of noise, which was all to the good. Another guard was strolling along the top of the face, a strip from which the top soil had been removed.

The work proceeded. Von Stalhein, his barrow full of coal, took it by the handles and began to push it, not without difficulty for the iron wheel sank into the soft earth, towards a long, squared-up stack of large coal some distance from the face. In passing he would at the nearest point be almost within touching distance of the heap of turves. His course was clearly marked by the grooves cut by the wheel on previous journeys to and fro.

Von Stalhein came on. Biggles, watching the guards, heard Fritz say in his own language: 'Don't stop, Uncle Erich. It's me, Fritz. Friends are near. I will speak again next time you pass.'

After von Stalhein had gone on Fritz said in a whisper to Biggles: 'He must have heard me, but he didn't pause; or falter.'

'Knowing him I wouldn't expect him to,' answered! Biggles. 'Speak again as he goes back for another load. The guards are safe. I'm watching them.'

'What shall I say?'

'Tell him I'm with you. He'll have to know sooner or later.' Biggles smiled curiously in the gloom of his recess. 'See how he takes that. If that doesn't shake him nothing will.'

As von Stalhein made his return journey Fritz said: 'Bigglesworth is with me. He brought me here in a plane. We've come to take you away, but not today.'

This time, after a glance to make sure the guards hadn't moved. Biggles was watching, and he saw von Stalhein's head jerk up a little at the mention of

his name.

‘Your uncle is a stubborn man,’ he told Fritz after von Stalhein had gone on. ‘I don’t think it pleased him to know I was here.’

‘He must know I couldn’t have got here by myself. What else shall I say?’

‘Ask him if it is intended to keep the prisoners shackled, and whether they are iron or steel.’

The question was put. Von Stalhein said the chains were iron. He did not know how long they were to be worn.

‘What next?’ asked Fritz.

‘Tell him that if conditions are right we may make the escape attempt tomorrow. I don’t know what time it will be, so he must hold himself in readiness to obey orders instantly they are given. You can tell him also that Manton got clear and is now with us.’

In due course this information was conveyed, and von Stalhein answered: ‘I would rather not accept help from Bigglesworth.’

‘I was expecting that,’ said Biggles, after von Stalhein had gone on. ‘Tell him to swallow his pride until we’re in a position to talk freely. He can then please himself what he does. If he won’t co-operate we are wasting time here, and may end by losing our lives for nothing. That wouldn’t be fair to you.’ The message was passed on, and to it von Stalhein replied: ‘Go home. You can do nothing while I wear this chain.’

Biggles spoke. ‘Leave that to me,’ he said, curtly.

This strange method of conversation was carried on for some time, ceasing only when a patrolling guard happened to be near. On one occasion there were some anxious minutes when a guard came along to examine and criticize in bullying tones the stack von Stalhein was building. He then stood with his back to the mound to watch. He was so close that Biggles could have touched him. The most anxious moment of all came when the guard lit a cigarette, and throwing down the match without making sure it was out, set on fire some herbage right against the mound. The danger passed when he stamped it out, although the hollow heap shook as if it might collapse. Then a whistle blew and the man moved on. Biggles, with a reassuring smile at Fritz, returned to his pocket the pistol he had drawn to use should they be discovered. The whistle turned out to be a signal for the prisoners to muster for their midday rations which, as far as could be seen, consisted of a piece of black bread and a strip of dried fish. This was eaten standing, after which the prisoners returned to their respective tasks so that the same conditions prevailed. During the half hour interval the prisoners had been allowed for their meal Biggles had sat with his forehead furrowed by concentrated thought. ‘What worries me is those shackles,’ he remarked once to Fritz. ‘I wasn’t prepared for that. Somehow we must get them off your uncle before we try to leave here.’

‘I can’t see how that is possible,’ replied Fritz, morosely. ‘Even if we threw him a file he’d be seen using it.’

‘If he was in the open, yes.’

‘Where else could he be?’

‘In here.’

Fritz stared at Biggles’ face. ‘You mean — inside this heap of rubbish with us?’

‘With you, anyway.’

‘He’d be missed at once.’

‘Not if someone else took his place.’

‘Who?’

‘Me.’

‘They’d see you weren’t a prisoner.’

‘They might not if I was wearing prison clothes.’

‘You wouldn’t have time to change clothes with my uncle, if that’s what you mean, before he was missed.’

‘It wouldn’t be necessary to change clothes. I would come here in prison clothes. Pat has an outfit I’m sure he’d be glad to get rid of. I’d take over your uncle’s job while he was in here with you filing off the shackle. With two of you working, one at each end of the chain, it shouldn’t take long to get rid of it.’

Fritz was still staring at Biggles’ face. ‘Now I begin to understand,’ he said, softly.

‘Understand what?’

‘Why you so often got the better of Uncle Erich. He once told me that the devil himself had nothing on you for resourcefulness.’

Biggles grinned. ‘That was nice of him. I must try not to let him down now.’ He became serious. ‘I have an idea, but it depends largely on the weather.’

‘How did you get this idea?’

‘That guard who stood here gave it to me when he dropped the match and nearly smoked us out. But I must think more about it. We’ll discuss details later. Here comes Erich. Tell him if all goes well we shall be back here tomorrow.’

Fritz passed on the message at the first opportunity, after which there was little more to say, and those within the mound, stiff and nearly frozen by an icy draught that came in through the cracks, could only wait in patience for dusk, when the workings would again be abandoned. It did not come too soon for either of them, and when at twilight the prisoners were mustered, counted and marched away, and Biggles pushed a hole in the mound to enable them to get out, their limbs were so cramped by long confinement that they had difficulty in moving at all. However, some violent exercise soon corrected that. They repaired the hole they had made and checked they had left nothing inside.

‘I don’t like the look of that sky,’ said Biggles, after a glance at it.

‘Why not?’

‘There’s a change in the weather coming. I didn’t like the yellow in those

clouds coming in from the sea.'

'If it rains it may get a little warmer.'

'If it gets a little warmer it's more likely to snow,' returned Biggles.

'There's snow in those clouds. If it snows we've had it.'

'How so?'

'Use your head, Fritz. If we get a fall of snow how can we move about without leaving tracks?'

'I didn't think of that,' confessed Fritz.

'Snow would also put paid to part of my escape plan,' said Biggles. 'But let's not stand talking here. Let's get home.'

Moving from mound to mound, always with an eye for danger, they made their way through the gathering gloom. Biggles heading for the clumps of birches which occurred on the near side of the river bank. It was not the shortest way to the bridge, he said, but it might be the safest way.

And so, in fact, it turned out, for having reached the birches, while they were still some little distance from their immediate objective, which was of course the bridge that would enable them to cross the river without getting soaked, they heard voices. However, with plenty of cover available they kept on until the bridge came into sight. By this time it was too dark to see anything distinctly, and at first all that could be seen was the glowing end of a cigar or cigarette. But as their eyes became adjusted to the darkness it became possible to make out two figures at the far end of the bridge.

'If the bridge has had a full-time guard put on it it's going to be too bad,' whispered Biggles. 'I don't fancy swimming on a night like this, or even wading the ford where Pat made his getaway, but we shall have to get across somehow. We'll wait a while to see what happens. Can you hear what those two fellows are talking about?'

'No.'

They waited, the delay being made no less irksome by an icy wind that seemed to be getting stronger. However, the end was promised when, nearly an hour later, two more men appeared on the track, coming from the direction of the estuary. It was apparently for these that the others were waiting, for after a brief conversation they all crossed the bridge as if they intended going straight on to the prison.

It was at this moment, just when the impatient watchers were mentally congratulating themselves that their tiresome wait had at last come to an end, that without the slightest warning a minor pandemonium broke out. There was a sudden shout. A split second later a rifle cracked and a bullet crashed its way through the slender twigs of the birches in which Biggles and Fritz were standing ready to move on. A second shot followed the first.

Biggles went flat, dragging Fritz down with him, for the bullets had passed unpleasantly close. Naturally, he could only assume that they had been discovered, although he was completely mystified as to how this could have happened, for neither of them had moved or made a sound. All he could do

was pull out his automatic and brace himself for anything that might happen. His worst fears appeared to be confirmed when to his ears came the thud of hooves galloping towards them. Then came a crash as a body smashed into the shrubs and an instant later a vague shape plunged past them. Biggles caught only a fleeting glimpse of it, but he saw from its size that it was not the horseman he had expected. The creature was an animal, a roebuck he thought. Then of course he realized what had happened. The animal, which the guards must have roused, was the target. But the danger had not yet passed. Voices approached, one man laying emphasis on his words.

‘He’s saying he hit the beast,’ breathed Fritz, who must also have perceived the cause of the commotion. ‘They’re going to look for it.’

‘Lie still, it’s our best chance,’ flashed back Biggles.

So there they lay on the damp, mossy ground, while the four men beat about looking for the deer which the shooter was convinced he had hit. It may have been he, who, anxious to prove his claim, pushed his way into the shrubs, at one moment standing within a yard or two of where Biggles was lying with most of his face covered so that it would not show, although the darkness was such that there was little chance of this.

The men hung about for some minutes before abandoning the quest. Then they moved off, still arguing, in the direction of the prison. As the voices receded Biggles drew a deep breath.

‘That was terrible,’ murmured Fritz.

‘I’ve told you before it isn’t the expected dangers that get you down,’ returned Biggles, lugubriously. ‘It’s those that jump at you out of the blue — like that confounded beast.’

‘It was the deer they were shooting at?’

‘Yes. A roe. Only a small animal, but it gave me a big fright,’ said Biggles. ‘Let’s get on. The others will be getting worried about us.’

They crossed the bridge and went on down the river bank. Biggles anxious to get back to the Otter after having been away for so much longer than he expected. But there was no question of hurrying. Deep night had fallen, and with a sky now completely covered by cloud the darkness was such as to make any sort of progress difficult. For this reason, to try to spy out the track ahead could serve no real purpose. It was practically impossible to see anything. All they could do was stand still from time to time to listen, hoping that sounds would betray any more guards who might be on the track. Not even this precaution was to be relied on, for the rustle of the rushes and the moaning of the wind in the firs would probably drown all other sounds.

In such conditions as these Biggles thought they might have difficulty in finding the aircraft, and when a spatter of driving sleet struck them in the face it seemed as if nature itself was doing its utmost to impede them. Fortunately this did not last long, but it was a warning of what might be on the way. As he had told Fritz, snow would make moving about doubly dangerous by reason of the tracks they would leave, although unless the snow was heavy it would

be unlikely to penetrate the trees to the forest floor. Even so, they would not be able to stay in the forest all the time. What Biggles had refrained from pointing out, and this is what he really feared, should the aircraft be given a coating of snow, frozen snow that could not be brushed off, the machine would be grounded until a thaw came to undo the mischief. Such a disaster would be sheer bad luck, because from inquiries made before the start the worst of the winter should now be over and spring well on the way. Had it not been so he would have waited until he could have been certain of the weather.

They pressed on, tired and cold, nerves on edge. At the best of times there was not much in the way of landmarks; merely the reeds on one side and the firs on the other. Both looked the same anywhere along the track even when they could be seen. Now they could only be felt. They saw nothing. Not a light could be seen anywhere. The only sound they heard was a melancholy howl, somewhere in the forest, that may have been made by a wolf.

‘Are you sure we haven’t come too far?’ asked Fritz, once, during a halt.

‘Frankly, I don’t know,’ admitted Biggles.

‘We seem to have come a long way.’

‘We’ve travelled slowly,’ reminded Biggles. ‘To get about in this sort of weather one needs the eyes of a cat,’ he added, disgustedly.

‘Do you think the others will come to look for us?’

‘They might, although that would be dangerous.’

‘How so?’

‘We might find ourselves shooting at each other. In these conditions, with everyone on the jump, one is inclined to shoot first and ask questions afterwards.’

They groped their way forward.

The end came a few minutes later when they had again stopped to discuss the position. They jumped when a voice that could only have been Bertie’s, alarmingly close, said brightly: ‘What cheer, chaps. Here we are.’

‘Well met, Bertie,’ replied Biggles thankfully. ‘We’re late, but we found the going a bit sticky.’

‘We were afraid you would, old boy,’ answered Bertie, materializing out of the darkness. ‘We’ve been taking it in turns to make sure you didn’t overshoot the mark or tumble into the drink looking for us. Algy’s idea.’

‘Well thought out,’ praised Biggles. ‘Where’s the dinghy?’

‘Right here. Or it should be. I hope I can find the bally thing.’

‘You’d better,’ said Biggles, grimly.

‘Yes. Here we are. This way. How did you get on?’

‘Fine,’ informed Biggles, as they felt their way into the little craft. ‘I’ll tell you all about it when we get on board and have had time to thaw out.’

Bertie paddled them to the Otter over water that was becoming restless, and Biggles found the machine responding, as was to be expected, by a certain amount of movement. When he remarked on this, Bertie said, apologetically: ‘Yes, old boy, and I’m afraid it’s going to get worse. Algy will

tell you all about it.’

CHAPTER 11

BIGGLES MAKES HIS PLAN

BIGGLES' first question when he stepped into the cabin was put to Algy. 'What's this I hear from Bertie about the weather becoming worse?'

'That's right,' stated Algy.

'How do you know?'

'With nothing else to do I was listening to the radio thinking I might hear news when I picked up a general warning broadcast by the U.S. Army Air Force Met. people in Japan calling all planes to base. The wind is swinging to the north-east and it may bring in snow over the whole area — which I take to include us.'

'That's lovely,' said Biggles, with biting sarcasm, as he took off his jacket and accepted a cup of coffee and a biscuit sandwich. 'A north-easter, even if it didn't bring snow, would blow into the estuary and pile up a sea that would prevent us from getting off. It might even put us ashore and wreck the ship. However, we can't expect to have it all our own way.' Speaking to Ginger he went on: 'Did you and Pat have any trouble getting back?'

'None at all. We saw a couple of guards in the distance but we dodged into the forest and they went past without seeing us.'

Biggles turned back to Algy. 'Has anything happened here?'

'Nothing. We saw two guards, probably the same two Ginger saw. They came along the track, but they couldn't have gone very far, because in about twenty minutes they went back.'

'Seen anything of Miskoff?'

'Not a sign.'

'What about that patrol boat?'

'It hasn't been back. Two fishing boats went out, but they came home as soon as the breeze started to freshen. That's all I have to report here,' stated Algy. 'How did you get on? That's what I want to know.'

'No trouble,' answered Biggles. 'It panned out as I hoped it would.'

In a few minutes he had narrated all that had happened at the coal workings. 'Von Stalhein behaved much as I expected. I think he'll accept our help. It's his only chance of getting out. If we can set him free on the island I shall be satisfied. He can please himself what he does after that, whether he stays here or comes home with us. He's suspicious I have an ulterior motive in coming here to help him.'

'He would,' said Algy, cynically. 'He doesn't believe there's such a thing as the milk of human kindness.'

'Maybe he's never seen any,' returned Biggles. 'No man can help being what he is and he tends to judge others by himself. We knew what von Stalhein was when we came here, so let's not waste time going into that.'

We've something more urgent on our hands, particularly if the weather is going to do the dirty on us.'

'Okay,' said Algy. 'What comes next?'

'Tomorrow I shall have a shot at getting von Stalhein away,' replied Biggles. 'I have a scheme. Everyone will have something to do, so listen carefully, all of you. It's going to depend somewhat on the weather. Well, we've no control over that. Otherwise it will depend largely on timing. If that goes wrong it will be our own fault.' Biggles broke off to light a cigarette.

'Now, this is the plan,' he went on. 'In the morning, before daylight, I shall take up my position in the same heap of muck as I did today. That's all laid on. Fritz will be with me. If von Stalhein is sent to another part of the workings it'll be just too bad. There's no reason to suppose he will be, but if he is the scheme will have to be postponed, because we can't afford to risk failure. If this comes unstuck we may never get another chance, because if once the enemy knows von Stalhein has friends here you can bet your life they'll put him where no one can get near him. They might even shift him to another prison. Now then. This is where we run into the snag of the shackle. We've got to get that chain off him before we make the break. That's absolutely imperative. It's certain we shall have to move fast when the time comes and a man can't run with his ankles tied.'

'Are you aiming to get that shackle off with the guards watching?' asked Pat.

'Yes.'

'Are you kiddin'?'

'This is no time to waste breath.'

'Okay. You tell me how you reckon to do the impossible.'

'I've no intention of attempting the impossible, but if you'll listen I'll tell you what I'm going to do.'

'Sorry. Go ahead.'

Biggles went on. 'I shall have with me the hacksaw I brought in the tool kit thinking we might have to cut through a barred window. It shouldn't take it long to bite through a piece of quarter-inch soft iron chain.'

'Long enough for the guards to see what goes on.'

'They won't see it happen.'

'They're not blind. What makes you think they won't see a man sawing the chain off his legs?'

'Because von Stalhein will then be inside the hide with Fritz, whose job it will be to get that chain off as fast as he can.'

'He'll be missed.'

'Oh no he won't, because I, in that ugly prison suit you're still wearing, will have taken his place. As von Stalhein passes with his barrow, with the heap of muck between him and the guard, he'll pop inside and I shall pop out to carry on with the barrow. The switch shouldn't take more than two or three seconds. Von Stalhein will of course have been warned, so he'll be ready to

jump to it. Do you all follow me so far?' Biggles looked round the circle of faces.

For a few minutes nobody spoke. Then Pat said, approvingly, 'I'm with you, and how!'

The others murmured assent.

'I shall carry on doing von Stalhein's work while Fritz is hacking off the shackle,' continued Biggles. 'I'm leaving that to Fritz because he is after all his nephew. I estimate it shouldn't take more than ten minutes. Fritz will tell me, as I go past with the barrow, when the job's done. He will also give his uncle a gun, so that if it should come to a shooting match he'll be able to do something about it. We're now all set to make the break and this is where we come to the timing. Fritz and I will of course have to be in position when the gang arrives, as we were today. I shall make the switch with von Stalhein at nine o'clock, which means that the chain should be off by nine-ten. To be on the safe side let's say nine-fifteen. This is where Ginger and Bertie come in. What they have to do is really a secondary part of the plan. Whether or not it will work I don't know, but should it come off it would simplify matters considerably — for those of us at the workings. Give me a pencil and paper.'

There was a short pause while these were handed over.

'Now, say this is the coal face,' resumed Biggles, drawing a line. 'Here's our hide.' He made a small circle. 'Von Stalhein is clearing a heap of coal where the face has collapsed forming a rough scree by which one can reach the top.' He marked it on the paper. 'Beyond that, forty or fifty yards back, is forest. More firs. From what I could see of them they looked pretty close packed. That will be our first objective. If we can reach that we shall have plenty of cover all the way to the river. But that will come later. Now then. Here we have the high ground between the prison and the workings. It isn't very high, but high enough to prevent the workings from being seen from the prison. It's carpeted with short thick rhododendron scrub mixed up with old fir loppings, so it should burn freely. With a wind behind it, it should make a really good fire.'

'And plenty of smoke,' murmured Ginger.

'Exactly. The idea is a smoke screen. You and Bertie will take your places, lying flat in the stuff — in a depression if you can find one — at the same time that Fritz and I go into the hide. To give the fire a flying start I suggest you each take a bottle of petrol and spread it in a line as far as it will go. Then, at nine-fifteen, all you'll have to do is drop a match on it. I can't guess what the guards will do when they see the hill on fire and the smoke bearing down on them. It should at any rate cause a diversion and induce them to take their eyes off the prisoners. If they get in a flap so much the better. At all events, with a lot of smoke about, even if it reduces visibility only a little, it should improve our chances of getting to the forest whether our departure is noticed or not.'

'But look here, old boy; what if the prisoners get caught in the flare-up?'

queried Bertie. 'The poor blighters won't be able to run with those beastly bangles jangling on their ankles — if you see what I mean.'

'There's no risk of that,' asserted Biggles. 'When the fire reaches the ground that's been cleared, which is forty or fifty yards from where the men are working, having no more fuel it'll go out.'

'And having lit our bonfire what do we do?' asked Ginger.

'Make for the bridge, flat out, and get back here as fast as you can. There should be plenty of smoke between you and the guards, so they won't see you. There's a chance you might be seen from the prison, but that's some distance off, so you should get to the bridge first even if someone comes after you. When you've crossed, take to the forest so that nobody will see which way you go: obviously, you'll do your best not to be seen heading this way.'

'And if we're intercepted?' questioned Bertie.

'I'll leave that to you. I'd shoot my way out, anything rather than be caught.'

'Too true,' murmured Bertie. 'How right you are.'

'And what about me and Pat while all this is going on?' Algy wanted to know.

'I'm sorry, but I shall have to ask you to stay here,' answered Biggles. 'If he likes Pat can go ashore and take up a position to watch the track and help us to fight a rear-guard action in the event of our being pursued. I'm not risking leaving the aircraft with no one in it, with the weather as it is. You stand by with everything ready for a quick take-off as soon as we're all on board. That may not seem very spectacular, but it may turn out to be the most important job of the lot, because whatever happens this business is going to send the balloon up in a big way. Once we're aboard, the sooner we're airborne the better our chance of getting clear of the island. We can be sure that telephones and radio will start buzzing, and if there are hostile aircraft within call they'll soon be after us.'

'And you reckon this scheme will work out like you say?' queried Pat, dubiously.

'Speaking from experience, if it works out without hitch nobody will be more surprised than me,' said Biggles, frankly. 'But one must start with some clear idea of what one's going to do. If the thing breaks down from an unforeseen cause we shall simply have to make the best of the situation that arises.' Biggles looked round. 'Well, that's about the lot. If anyone isn't absolutely clear about what he has to do, or has any questions to ask, now's the time to talk.'

'It's quite clear to me,' said Fritz, and the others agreed.

'Fair enough,' said Biggles. 'Then let's get organized and make ready everything we're likely to need.' He looked at his watch. 'Time's getting on. Those of us who are going on the job have about three hours for a spot of shut-eye. That should be enough. There'll be plenty of time for sleep when we get to some place where there are beds. You don't mind swapping clothes

with me, Pat?' Biggles grinned. 'You can have 'em back afterwards.'

'Glad to,' agreed Pat promptly. 'Brother, do they stink!'

'I can take it. We're about the same build,' observed Biggles.

'So what? These weren't made to measure.'

'And as I'm about the same build as von Stalhein, although he may be a bit taller, with a little mud and coal dust on my face the switch shouldn't be spotted unless a guard comes close.'

'What if one does?' asked Pat. 'What if he spots you're not wearing shackles?'

'He'll wish he hadn't been such a nosy-parker,' said Biggles, grimly. 'Get out the tool kit. Ginger, and don't forget to give Fritz a spare gun for his uncle. I'm going to have a look outside to see what the weather's doing.'

He was soon back. 'It's dry,' he reported. 'The wind's veered a point and is blowing straight into the estuary. It's whipping up a bit of a sea, but so far nothing to worry about. If the wind stays where it is it'll be just right for the fire. Which reminds me, Ginger, and you, Bertie. Be sure to start your fire dead in line with the wind, so that the smoke strikes the workings, otherwise if it'll be no good. Now I'm going to hit the hay. You'd better do the same, Fritz. Whoever's on guard see that we're on our feet by four o'clock. I hate being rushed.'

CHAPTER 12

A TEST OF NERVES

IT was still dark, for it was only a little after four o'clock, when those comprising the rescue party, their pockets heavy with equipment, were landed on the track, and after a final word with Pat, who had elected to remain ashore ready to deal with an emergency should one arise, set off on what Ginger knew could not be anything but a desperate sortie however well things might go. Biggles, wearing Pat's prison outfit, led the way over what was now familiar ground.

There had been one slight change in the arrangement this at Bertie's suggestion. It was that he and Ginger, instead of returning direct to the aircraft on the completion of their fire-raising mission, as had originally been planned, should cross the bridge, and keeping under cover in the forest wait there for Biggles' party to join them. They could then all return home together, making a stronger force to deal with opposition than if they retired independently of each other.

Biggles agreed, saying he could see nothing against that. In fact, there was much to be said for it.

It should be said that Pat, in order to remain ashore, had hidden the dinghy in some reeds close in, where it would be ready to hand instantly should it be needed in a hurry when the expedition returned. Biggles thought this was more than likely.

The weather had not changed in the last few hours. It was still dry, with no sign yet of the promised snow beyond a sky ten-tenths covered with cloud of a density sufficient to black out the moon and stars. A bitterly cold wind, as yet no more than 'moderate,' was still coming from the same quarter. It had blown up a short, choppy sea, but nothing that the Otter, designed for hard work, could not face if it had to take off.

The party moved warily, in silence, of necessity keeping to the track, because movement in the inky darkness, of the forest could not be anything but slow — too slow, since the first essential of the scheme was that they should all be in position before daybreak. Biggles was not worried about having to stay on the waterside track because, as he had remarked, at that hour the only people having a reason to be out were search parties seeking Pat, and they would obviously be wasting their time looking for him at night in country where there was practically no open ground. This assumption proved to be correct, and they came within striking distance of the bridge without seeing or hearing anything to cause them uneasiness.

Biggles now halted the party while he went on alone to reconnoitre. He moved with the utmost caution, advancing a step at a time, pistol in hand ready to act fast should he encounter enemies. But nothing happened.

Reaching the foot of the bridge he stopped for a full minute to listen, for with visibility down to a few yards he couldn't see the far side. He whistled softly, confident that should anyone be there he would be answered. There was no reply, so he returned to the others and by a touch indicated that it was safe to go on.

He crossed the bridge first. The others followed one by one so that presently they stood close together on the far side.

'I'm glad that's over,' said Biggles. 'I don't mind telling you I was scared stiff of that bridge. Had anyone been about it would have been here. Well, this is when we part company.' He pointed. 'There's your hill,' he told Bertie and Ginger. 'When you get in position keep still and keep your heads down. Don't try to see what's going on. If you can see the enemy he can see you. Curiosity at this game can lead to trouble.' He stared hard at Bertie's normally slim figure. 'What the deuce have you got in your pockets?' he inquired, curiously.

'Just one or two odds and ends, old boy, that I thought might come in handy,' replied Bertie, carelessly.

Biggles looked at him suspiciously. 'Don't get up to any foolery.'

'Have a heart, laddie,' returned Bertie in a pained voice. 'Would I be such an ass as to fool about at a time like this? I'm all of a dither.'

'Okay,' concluded Biggles. 'Off you go, and good luck.'

Bertie and Ginger moved off, and in a few strides had disappeared as completely as two stones dropped in the sea.

'Come on, Fritz,' said Biggles, to his one remaining companion. 'We're all right for time, and I can't imagine anyone being here at this hour in such miserable weather.'

However, they did not relax their caution, and well before the first grey streak appeared in the sky, the dismal herald of another day, they were in their hide, building up the entrance hole as well as they could from the inside. Biggles smeared his face with a handful of mud and Fritz laid on the ground the tools he would need to relieve his uncle of his leg-irons.

Slowly the day dawned under a sky the colour of lead, but even then it seemed a long time before the head of the column of slave workers and their armed escort topped the rise, presently to disperse to their customary places at the diggings. This was a great relief to Biggles, who had been on tenterhooks for fear there might be a change, or in such ominous weather conditions the men not turn out at all.

There was in fact one thing different from the previous day. A second man was put on to help von Stalhein clear the coal from the scree. His job was to pull out the larger pieces of coal by hand and tumble them to the bottom where von Stalhein could reach them more easily and load them on his barrow. Biggles was concerned but not alarmed. It meant that after he had changed places with von Stalhein there would be moments when he would be near this man. What the man would do if, and when, he realized that his companion had in some miraculous way changed his identity, was a question

for which there was no answer. Biggles did not think he would betray him intentionally; he was more afraid that by his behaviour the man would attract one of the guards' attention and give him away by accident. However, as nothing could be done about this situation it had to be accepted. What was more important, the number of guards on duty remained the same, the nearest taking up his position, as before, nearer a larger gang.

The day's work began. The time by Biggles' watch was a few minutes after eight. Von Stalhein came along with his first load. It might have been imagination but it struck Biggles that he looked a little more alert than when he had last seen him.

As the barrow went slowly past the hide Biggles said in a low voice. 'We're here. All goes well. Zero hour one hour from now. Fritz is with me. More next time.'

It took von Stalhein about ten minutes to stack his load, and another five to return to the scree. With the barrow empty, and the going slightly downhill, he went back rather faster than he came and there was less time for conversation. In fact, all Biggles said was: 'If there's trouble or if work is called off come here. Fritz has a gun for you.'

Von Stalhein did not answer.

The next time, pushing slowly with another full load, as he drew level with the hide with the mound between him and the guard. Biggles continued: 'When I give the word you will come in here from this side and I shall take your place. Fritz will cut off your chain.'

Still von Stalhein made no reply. He went on with his task without pause as if Biggles had not spoken.

All Biggles had to say after that was: 'In forty minutes from now the hill behind us will be set on fire. Whatever orders are given when the smoke comes down ignore them. Come here.'

Actually, Biggles did make one more remark, and he did so because not by the flicker of an eyelid had von Stalhein indicated that he had heard the instructions. Biggles knew all about his old enemy's ice-cold imperturbability, but even so he was a little worried and wanted to make sure that von Stalhein had grasped the plan. Moreover, an awful doubt had assailed him that von Stalhein had no intention of taking orders from him. It would be in keeping with his stubborn character. Had Fritz not been there he might even have supposed that von Stalhein intended to betray him for the sheer satisfaction of seeing him in the slave gang, so that their careers would end together as had more than once been prophesied. But Biggles dismissed this as an unworthy thought. Anyway, the presence of Fritz ruled that out. However much von Stalhein might hate him. Biggles, he would hardly condemn his nephew to a living death.

Anyway, as von Stalhein went past the next time Biggles said: 'Do you understand?'

Von Stalhein spoke for the first and only time. And he did not waste words.

‘Yes,’ he answered, succinctly.

That was all. He passed on.

Biggles began to count the minutes. There were still twenty to go. Fritz’s face, close to his own, was pale with suppressed excitement.

Biggles frowned at him. ‘Keep calm,’ he ordered. But even he was beginning to feel the tension. There was still time for things to go wrong.

At ten minutes to nine he saw a single small flake of snow come drifting along on the wind. One flake. But it was enough to bring his lips together in a hard line. He knew more would follow, and snow at this moment was the last thing he wanted. If nothing else it would damp the herbage and prevent it from burning freely. Most of all he feared that if it started to snow in earnest the prisoners would be called together for fear some of them should try to escape under cover of it. Flurries appeared, patches of tiny flakes spinning and whirling in the still breeze. So far these were not thick enough to affect visibility, but it was obvious that the predicted storm had arrived, or the advance guards of it. The sky was deep indigo.

It still wanted five minutes to nine, but he resolved to act at once. He was well aware of the risks of changing a plan when others were involved, but in the circumstances these seemed not so great as waiting for the worst to happen. He was sure the prisoners would not be allowed to go on working in a snowstorm that looked like persisting for some time. With so few guards too many of them would be out of sight.

Wherefore he said to Fritz, ‘The next time your uncle goes past I shall call him in. He can’t know the exact time, so it can’t affect him. He’ll be ready.’

At this juncture von Stalhein was loading his barrow. It was full, so it would only be two or three minutes before he passed the hide on his next trip to the stack. Unfortunately, perhaps trying to appear zealous to the watching guard, he put on one lump of coal too many, with the result that the barrow overturned, spilling its contents. The accident could not have occurred at a worse moment. Biggles hoped the guard would ignore it. But no. He shouted something. What he said was not understood by Fritz, who did not hear clearly. It may have been a warning to be more careful. Had the matter ended there no harm would have been done; but it did not. The guard, possibly looking for an excuse to exercise his authority, followed up his shout by striding to the scree and hitting von Stalhein a vicious cut across the back with his whip. Von Stalhein, who was bending over his task as he reloaded the barrow, did not see the blow coming. He nearly fell. Not a sound left his lips. He carried on with his work as if nothing had happened. This seemed to spur the guard to fury. He struck again. This time von Stalhein saw the blow coming, and throwing up an arm to protect his face took the blow on it. Still he made no sound.

Fritz, who was by this time quivering with rage, started to move, but Biggles held him back. ‘Keep still, you fool,’ he hissed. ‘Do you want to ruin everything?’

Fritz sank back, breathing heavily. 'The swine,' he grated.

The guard stood over von Stalhein while the barrow was reloaded and started on its short journey to the stack. Then he retired, slowly, not to his original position but to a spot somewhat nearer.

'I'm going to press on regardless,' Biggles told Fritz, grimly. 'It's now or never.'

Von Stalhein came along, painfully. When he was not more than a couple of yards away Biggles said tersely: 'This time,' and as he spoke he pushed a large hole in the side of the mound and scrambled out. By that time von Stalhein was level. Without a word he put down the barrow and crawled in. Biggles took the barrow by the handles and walked on. As he had judged, the changeover had not occupied more than two or three seconds. A swift glance showed the second prisoner with his back to the mound as he worked on the scree. He could have seen nothing.

Biggles went on and continued building the stack as he had seen von Stalhein doing it. Out of the corner of an eye he watched the guard. The man was looking at him but he hadn't moved. Biggles knew of course that; he hadn't seen him change places with von Stalhein because the thing had been done on the side of the mound farthest from him.

Biggles went back to the mound for another load. All he needed now was ten minutes' grace, but he was aware that in that time anything could happen. As he passed the mound he could hear the hacksaw rasping into the iron. The operation was making more noise than he had thought it would, but so far the guard appeared not to have noticed it. Perhaps the wind was to be thanked for that.

The snow was now more general, falling from a leaden sky in larger flakes. Biggles prayed for five more minutes' respite.

Back at the scree he proceeded to reload the barrow, but he hadn't got far with this when he saw that his fellow prisoner had stopped work to look at him; or rather, stare at him. He was staring not at his face but at his feet. And Biggles knew why. It may have been the absence of the rattle of a chain when he moved that had drawn his attention to the fact that Biggles was not wearing one. He was a coarse, dull-witted-looking fellow of middle age, and in his effort to work out how Biggles had managed to get rid of his shackle he rested on his pickaxe. The result was inevitable. This laxity brought a shout from the guard. It had the desired effect, and the man resumed his labour with alacrity.

Another minute passed.

The man moved nearer to Biggles and muttered something under his breath. What he said Biggles did not know, for the words were spoken in a language he didn't even recognize. But he could guess. The man was asking him about the chain. Biggles gave a grunt that might have meant anything and went on with his work.

By this time von Stalhein had been in the mound for the best part of ten minutes so there was reason to hope that the shackle was off, or nearly off.

The timing of the task had been advanced by about five minutes, so that period had still to elapse before Bertie and Ginger could be expected to come into action.

With his barrow full Biggles was on his way back to the stack when there came the sound he had been dreading; the series of short sharp bursts on a whistle to call the prisoners together, the guard in charge having apparently at last decided that it was no longer safe for them to remain scattered. In this his judgment was undoubtedly correct, for with snow now driving across the workings and gathering density every minute, visibility was already down to about fifty yards.

With his eyes fixed on a point ahead, for he dared not look round for fear the guard should make a signal which it would have been dangerous to ignore. Biggles went on as if he hadn't heard the whistle. He knew he was taking a chance of being shot but there was no alternative. As he passed the mound he said crisply: 'Are you free?'

'Yes,' came back the answer he was hoping to hear.

'Stand by,' he said, pushing on, gambling on the arrival of the smoke to make the next part of the plan less perilous. It was due at any moment now. The snow was providing a certain amount of cover; but not enough to prevent the nearest guard from seeing them should they attempt to leave the workings. That would mean shooting, and a casualty at that stage would put them in a hopeless position. To leave one of their number wounded, at the mercy of the enemy, was unthinkable, yet should the others stay they would all be lost.

A few yards past the mound, anxious not to get too far from it in case the smoke arrived a minute early, he pretended to stumble. He still did not know if the guard was watching him, because for reasons already explained he dare not look round. His stumble, which he merely intended to delay his progress, went farther than he intended; the weight fell on one side of the barrow the handle slipped and the whole thing overturned.

He had stooped to reload when a harsh voice brought him round to be confronted by the guard who must have advanced swiftly and was now just behind him — on his own side of the mound, so that had he turned he must have seen the hole in it. Luckily, being entirely concerned with Biggles, he did not do this. He had hung his whip over his shoulder and was standing in a threatening attitude with his rifle half raised as if something in Biggles' behaviour had aroused his suspicions. His mouth opened as if to question him, but happening to glance down the words died on his lips. For a moment he stared unbelievably at Biggles' unfettered ankles. When the truth really sank in he moved fast. And the rifle was already in his hands.

Biggles had been reluctant to use his own gun for fear the report would bring more guards hurrying to the spot, but now he saw that was a risk that would have to be taken.

In the event the necessity did not arise, because at that moment behind the guard loomed like an avenging angel the black and yellow-striped figure of

von Stalhein. In his right hand was his shackle. He swung it, and with all the force of his hatred of the man who had used a whip on him, brought it down on his head. The guard, without knowing what had hit him, collapsed like an empty sack.

‘Thanks,’ said Biggles, calmly.

It was now that he caught the first whiff of smoke. Looking in the direction from which he knew it must be coming he could see a dull orange glow even through the snow. By this time Fritz had followed his uncle out of the hide and Biggles waited for no more.

‘Run for it,’ he said crisply, and raced towards the scree — or where he knew it to be, for with snow and smoke it was no longer possible to see it.

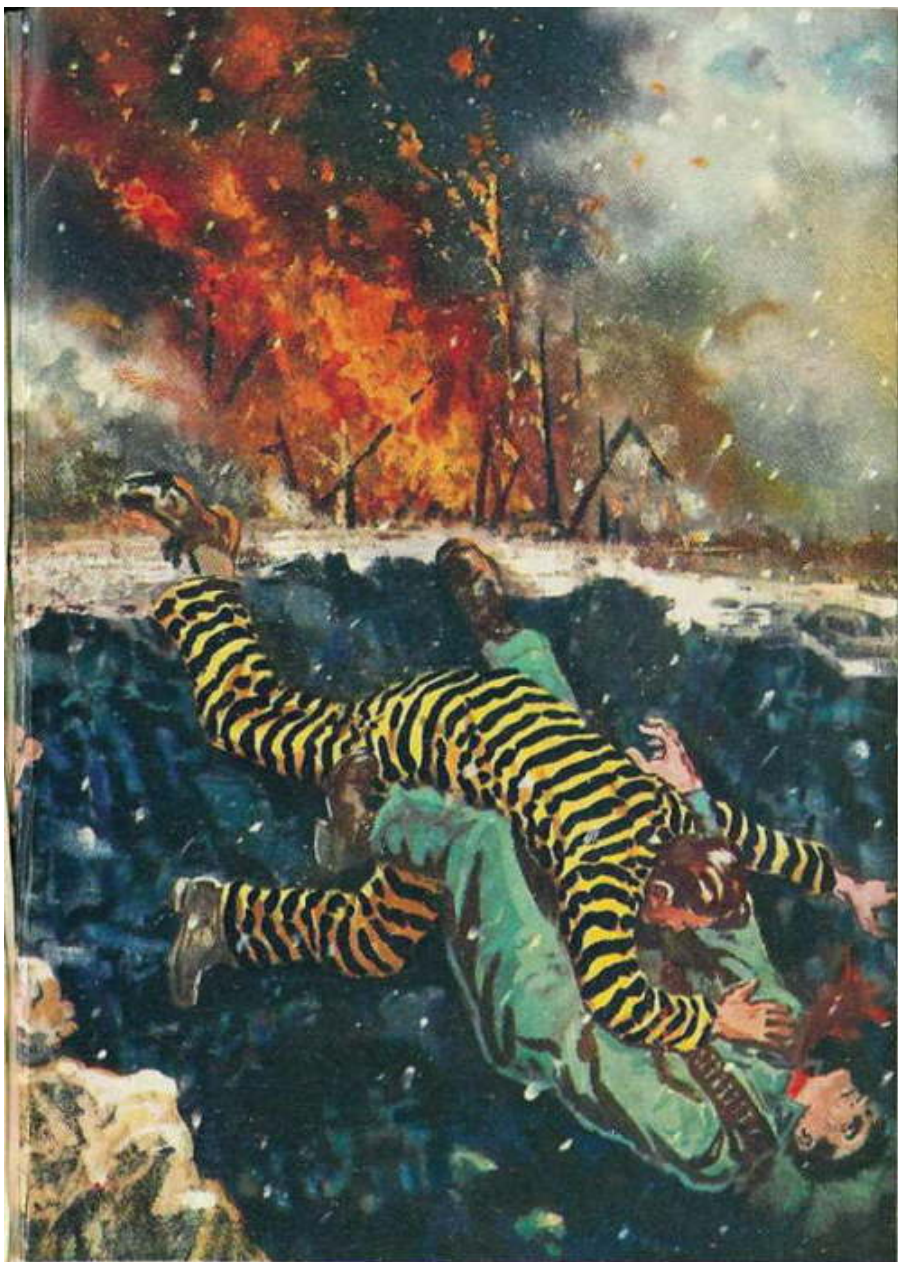
CHAPTER 13

BERTIE TAKES A HAND

A MEDLEY of noises suggested that the whole workings were in a state of confusion, for the snow was now really coming down. There was a good deal of shouting. A shot was fired. Clouds of smoke were sweeping along on the wind. Not only smoke, but smuts and particles of burning matter. Looking back from the bottom of the scree Biggles was startled to see a long low yellow wall of flame leaping towards the workings. He had expected a good fire, but nothing like this. He caught the tang of resin, and realized that this and the wind were together responsible for the conflagration.

He was alarmed to see small pieces of burning fir needles whirling over his head to fall beyond the coal face. Knowing that the herbage there was much the same as on the hill he was afraid the whole place might catch fire. If it reached the fir forest, in which he intended to take cover, the whole area would become an inferno.

With the loose stuff sliding under his feet he ran up the scree and arrived at the top to collide, literally, with a guard coming the other way. There was no time for either of them to use a weapon, so all they could do was clutch each other. For a few seconds, locked in a clinch, they swayed on the lip of the scree; then the ground broke away under their feet, and still fast in an embrace which neither dare release, they rolled over and over to the bottom. Here they broke apart. They gained their feet together, but before either could do anything a gun had crashed. The guard crumpled. Fritz had fired the shot. He and his uncle had followed them down, von Stalhein still carrying his shackle. There for an instant they stood while Biggles recovered his poise, and the breath that had been knocked out of him in the encounter.



They rolled over and over to the bottom of the scree (page 153)

‘Let’s get into the forest,’ he panted. ‘Then we swing left to the river.’

They scrambled back to the top of the scree and ran blindly towards the trees, which Biggles knew were there although he couldn’t see them. In fact, the smoke was now so dense that it was impossible to see anything. As they ran, often stumbling over obstacles, it stung their eyes and set them coughing. The

dark wall of the forest appeared out of the murk, they blundered into it, but did not go far. Biggles, now leading, turned left and headed for the river, which had to be crossed. Just how far away it was he didn't know, for he had never seen the upper reaches, and for all he knew it might have turned away. He could only assume it was somewhere in front of them, so if they kept on they would come to it in time. Swerving between the tree trunks and ducking under branches they ran on, and did not steady the pace until they had covered a distance which Biggles judged must have put them beyond the lower end of the workings.

He stopped to enable them to get together, for von Stalhein had been inclined to lag. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes,' was the curt reply, 'But it is some time since I had this sort of exercise. Ignore me. Where are you making for?'

'The river, then the bridge.'

'It will be guarded.'

'Perhaps. We'll see. I'd prefer to get to the other side in dry clothes if it's possible. The river, when we get to it, will give us our bearings.'

Biggles set off again, now at a brisk walk. The air was still full of smoke, but there was no snow under the close-growing trees. What was happening at the workings he didn't know and didn't particularly care. All he could see between the trees in that direction was a dull orange glow through the blur of smoke and snow.

It was farther to the river than he expected, but they came to it at last. It was not very wide at this point, but wide enough to soak them should they try to ford it. It might have meant swimming, for the water was black and there was no means of judging its depth. As was the case lower down, the bank they were on was fringed at intervals with clumps of dwarf birch. There was also an occasional low-hanging willow.

'We'll try for the bridge,' decided Biggles. 'If we can get across without a casualty we should be all right. They'd have a job to find us in the forest on the other side.'

He set off again, keeping as close as possible to the turgid stream.

'Where will you make for if you get across?' asked von Stalhein.

'The aircraft. It's hidden in the tall rushes beside the estuary, a few miles from here.'

'Before we embark I shall want a word with you.'

'I hope you're not going to be awkward.'

'Let us say precautionary.'

'Very well, but I hope you'll make it brief, because I when I get to the machine I'm not going to hang about arguing.' Biggles spoke very definitely. 'We haven't crossed the bridge yet, anyway,' he added, tartly.

Nothing more was said. They walked on in single file, von Stalhein bringing up the rear, picking their way when they were in the birches and hurrying across gaps. After the recent turmoil all now seemed strangely quiet.

The snow was coming down in larger flakes. For a time the soft hiss they made as they reached the ground, or fell on the birches, was the only sound. But presently another, as weird as could be imagined, came creeping softly through the silence. They all knew what it was. The clank — clank — clank of fetters. Somewhere near at hand the chain gang was on the move.

Biggles raised a hand in the halt signal. 'We'd better let them get out of the way,' he said quietly.

They waited until the ominous noise had faded and then moved on.

They had covered perhaps a quarter of a mile when there occurred one of those breaks that not infrequently happen in a late snowstorm. The snow stopped as abruptly as if the source of supply had been cut off, with the result that the landscape lay open to view. This catching them in the open they made a dash for the next group of birches, and having reached them stopped again to survey the scene. It was much as might have been expected.

They were at the point where the track came near the river not far from the ford where Pat had made his dash for freedom. Over to the left smoke was still drifting away from them to cross the workings although the fire appeared to have burnt itself out. Its trail on the hill in front of them was marked by a blackened area. The bridge could be seen about three hundred yards farther on. On the track leading to the prison was the chain gang, marching in a tight column with guards on either side. With a wry smile Biggles observed that the gang at one period must have been marching parallel with them, and no great distance away. This of course was when they had heard the rattle of chains. Not that there had been any risk of collision while the snow persisted; nor was there now, while they were under cover, any risk of being seen, for the gang with its guards, heading for the prison was moving away from them. Nevertheless, should any of them turn while Biggles' party was in the open it would almost certainly be noticed, with two of them in the conspicuous black and yellow uniform.

'We'll wait here for a minute to let them get a bit farther on,' decided Biggles. 'We're still within range of the guards' rifles. Incidentally, I notice only one guard is missing. That must have been the fellow who was shot. I doubt if you killed the fellow you clouted on the skull with the chain, von Stalhein. That astrakhan bonnet he was wearing would soften the blow. If he had come round, and talked, he will have set the head guard a pretty problem.'

'How?' asked Fritz.

'Well, he would say, there must have been at least two men concerned with the escape, one of them without shackles. But when the prisoners were counted, as they would be before starting for home, it would be discovered that only one man was missing. Who, then, could have hit the guard over the head? And how did the other fellow get his chain off?'

'The guard saw that?' queried Fritz.

'Too true he did. His eyes nearly popped out. That risk was always on the boards. The chap I was working with noticed it, too. He stared so hard I was

afraid he'd give the game away. If the prisoners are questioned when they get home he'll confirm the guard's story that one man had got rid of his chain. That should give them something to think about.' Biggles turned his head and stared down the river. 'I don't see anyone at the bridge, so as soon as that mob is at a safe distance we'll make a dash for it. I'm glad that snow has stopped. It was just beginning to lie and would soon have shown tracks. Not only ours, but those of Bertie and Ginger.'

'I suppose they started the blaze,' said von Stalhein.

'Correct.'

'A nice piece of team work.'

'I'm glad you appreciate that. A team on which you could rely was something you never had. You couldn't trust anybody.'

'Nor would you, had you been in my position,' said von Stalhein, stiffly.

'It was nobody's fault but your own that you were in that position,' returned Biggles, evenly. 'But let's not talk about that now.'

'Where are your two assistants?'

'Assuming they got clear without trouble they may be I waiting for us on the far side of the bridge to cover our retreat should we need help; or they may have gone ahead. I left it to their discretion.'

'I don't see them,' said Fritz.

'I wouldn't expect to,' replied Biggles. 'They would be so daft as to stand in the open. If they're there they'll be watching from inside the forest.'

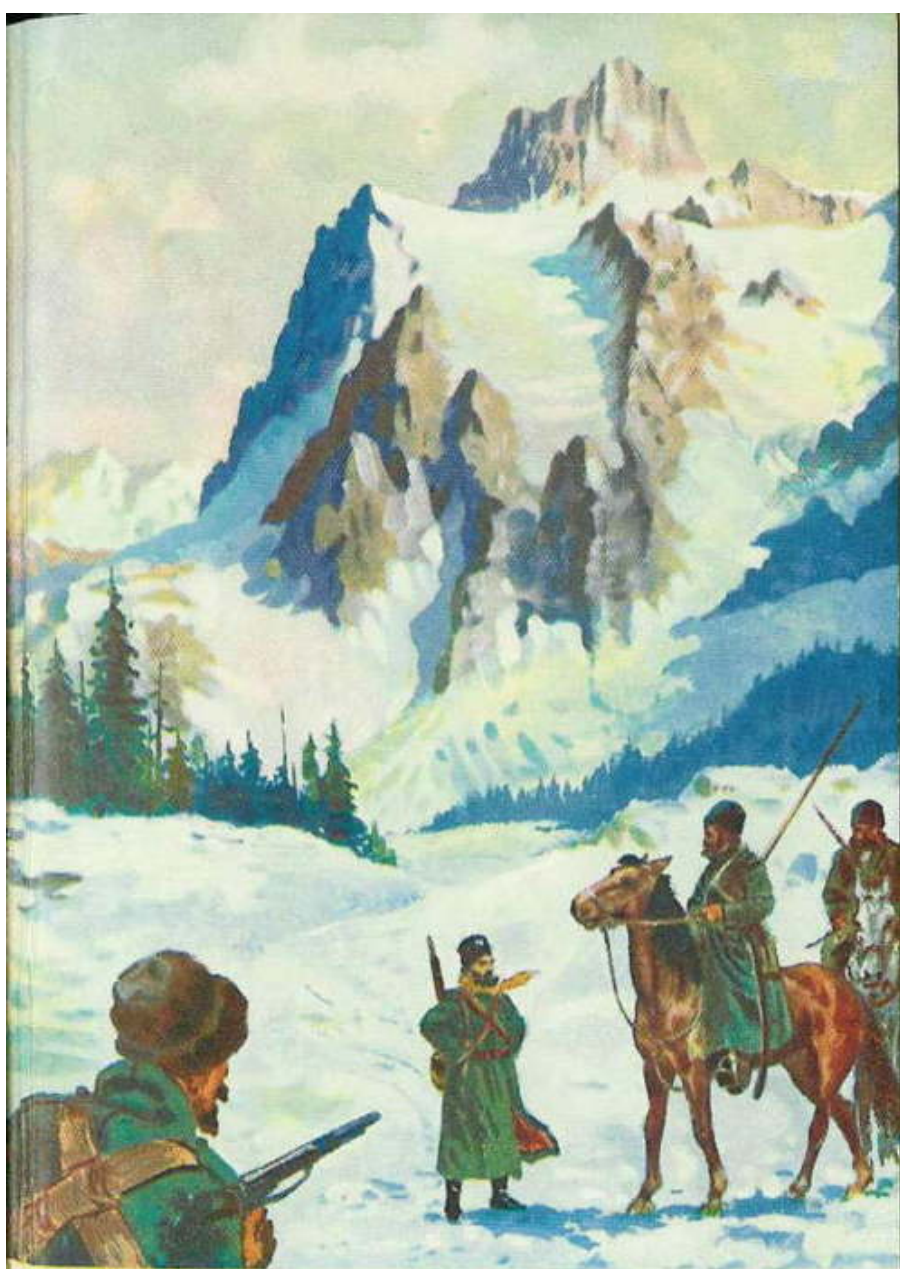
'Something happens at the prison,' said von Stalhein.

Biggles, who had been looking at the bridge, turn his eyes in that direction to see that the prison gates had been opened to permit the exit of three Cossacks who cantered down the track towards the chain gang, which still had a little way to go.

He spoke quickly. 'They may be going to the bridge. They may stay there. If they get to it first we could find ourselves stuck on this side. If they stop to speak to the guards we'll make a dash for it. We may get a minute before they see us. Anyway, if it comes to a race we should beat them to it. We can get a bit nearer.'

Keeping an eye on the riders he thrust his way to the extreme end of that particular line of birches. There, still in cover, he waited, watching the track. 'Fine! They're going to stop,' he went on, seeing the riders rein in. 'They'll want to know what's happened. Sprint when I give the word. Stop for nothing. With luck we may even reach the bridge before they look this way.'

The riders halted their horses, presumably to allow the leader to speak to the head guard, for he walked over to them.



The riders halted their horses (page 158)

‘Now!’ snapped Biggles, and ran towards the bridge.

The distance to be covered was something in the order of two hundred yards. The riders would have at least double that distance to travel.

Biggles, with the others racing close behind, had got about half-way when a distant shout told him they had been seen. He refrained from looking but

kept his eyes on the ground in front of him, for it was by no means level and a fall at this stage would have been serious. Taking minor obstacles in his stride he ran on, and not until he was at the first step of the bridge did he look round. The riders, spurring their horses at full gallop, were still a hundred yards away.

Von Stalhein drew his pistol and turned to face them. 'You go on,' he said calmly. 'I'll hold them till you have good start.'

'Get across the bridge,' snapped Biggles. 'And you, Fritz. I'm giving the orders here.'

'But—'

'Get across. I haven't come all this way to cart home a corpse.'

Von Stalhein shrugged, and followed by Fritz walked across the bridge.

Biggles fired two shots at the riders, more to let them know he was armed than with any real hope of hitting one of them. The shots did at least have the effect of checking them while they unslung their rifles, and during this brief time Biggles hurried across the bridge to join the others on the far side.

To his temporary surprise, for in the excitement of the moment he had forgotten about them, he found Bertie and Ginger there.

Bertie was waving them on. 'Press on, chaps, press on,' he cried. 'Get in the timber. Hold your hats and see Horatius do his stuff. If those blighters want to come over this side they'll have to swim.'

By this time the three riders were within fifty yards and still coming on. Their rifles were now in their hands, although there was no likelihood of them being used with any degree of accuracy while they were on the move.

Bertie's arm went back over his shoulder, then forward. Something left his hand. It landed just beyond the middle of the bridge. There was a blinding flash and a deafening explosion. Smoke swirled. Splinters flew. Bertie repeated the performance with similar result.

This was more than any horse could be expected to face. The three, nearly at the bridge, reared, and then bolted in different directions, their riders unable to control them with one hand, for the other was holding a rifle.

'Tally ho!' yelled Bertie. 'Gone away.'

The wind soon blew the smoke clear and then it could be seen that the middle of the bridge had disappeared.

'Jolly good,' said Bertie, grinning. 'Do you know, chaps, I've been wanting to do that for years.'

'Do what?' asked Biggles, shortly.

'Make a good bang.'

'Well, you've done it,' said Biggles. 'How did you do it?'

'I slipped a couple of dynamite cartridges in my pocket, old boy — you know, those you brought thinking we might have to blow a hole in the prison. I had an idea this morning they might be useful.'

'You didn't tell me,' accused Biggles, sternly.

'No jolly fear. You'd have said no to my little notion.'

‘I would.’

‘And who have we here?’ went on Bertie, fixing his monocle to look at von Stalhein. ‘Well, if it isn’t—’

‘Cut the chatter,’ requested Biggles, sharply. ‘We’ve a lot to do yet.’ He was watching one of the horsemen who, with his animal now under control, was racing back towards the river, heading for a point a little higher up.

‘That’s Vostov,’ said Ginger.

‘He’s making for the ford where Pat crossed,’ surmised Biggles. ‘Let’s get along. If he gets on the track behind us he could make things uncomfortable. It would be a pity if someone was hit after all this.’

‘You were right,’ said Fritz, as they watched Vostov reach the ford and urge his mount into the stream.

‘How about having a shot at him,’ suggested Ginger.

‘No use,’ said Biggles. ‘You’d never hit him at that distance. Save your bullets. You may need them before we’re home.’

He had half turned to go when a rifle shot rang out.

‘Somebody’s had a shot at him, anyway,’ said Bertie. ‘Hit him, too, by Jove.’

Vostov had dropped his rifle to clutch at his mount’s neck. For a few seconds he hung on, slowly slipping. Then he fell out of the saddle. The horse, after a few plunges, turned back, dragging Vostov, whose foot was caught up in the stirrup, with it. At the last moment the foot came clear, leaving its rider to float down the river. The horse, reaching the bank, galloped away.

‘I suppose it would be Algy who fired that shot,’ guessed von Stalhein.

‘Algy isn’t here,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’ve no idea—’

‘I know!’ exclaimed Ginger. ‘It must have been Miskoff. I hadn’t time to tell you, but we saw him go past when we were hiding here after starting the fire.’

‘Who’s Miskoff — another of your team?’ questioned von Stalhein.

‘No. He’s a Russian we met here. He was out to get Vostov.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said von Stalhein. ‘That man was a devil.’

‘Miskoff is an ex-prisoner. He served his time, but they still wouldn’t leave him alone.’

‘Are you going to wait for him?’

‘No. He has no real interest in us, nor have we with him. He won’t leave here. His one object in life is to wage war on the people who, in that prison, gave him hell. He told us so.’

‘There’s something going on at the prison now,’ put in Ginger.

The chain gang had been halted at the gate. Out through the gloomy portal came a dozen or so men in uniform. They advanced down the track at a run.

‘That’s the squad of troops who are quartered in the prison in case of trouble,’ advised von Stalhein.

‘In that case we won’t wait for them,’ said Biggles. ‘Now we’ve got our breath back we’ll push on. We could hardly expect all this fuss not to have

been heard at the prison.'

'Don't forget I want to talk to you,' said von Stalhein, quietly.

'Not now,' returned Biggles, crisply. 'This isn't the time. We've talked long enough as it is. We still have some way to go.'

'But I would rather have an understanding—'

'If you don't like our company the forest is all yours,' broke in Biggles. 'We've got you out. That's what I came to do. Having done it I'm off home. You do what you like, but don't forget you have Fritz to consider.'

Von Stalhein bowed. 'As you wish.'

Biggles was looking at the sky. 'I'll tell you something else,' he went on. 'The snow hasn't finished yet. If I know anything there's more to come. A lot more. And when those troops see what happened to the bridge they'll know which side of the river we're on.'

He set off down the track at a brisk walk.

Von Stalhein fell in behind.

Biggles didn't stop when, a minute or two later, there was some sporadic shooting in the distance.

'What do you suppose that's all about?' asked Ginger.

Fritz answered. 'Miskoff, wiping out more old scores.'

'Where did he get the rifle?' asked von Stalhein.

'He killed a guard with his axe.'

Bertie chipped in. 'He's a useful lad. If he's sitting in the trees opposite that ford he'll make things hot for those troops if they try to cross the river there.'

'All right. That's enough talking,' said Biggles.

He strode on.

CHAPTER 14

HEAVY GOING

BIGGLES' prediction about the weather soon proved to be correct. They had not gone far when the snow came on again, and this time it was the real thing. In another five minutes they were fighting their way against a raging blizzard which quickly piled up an inch of snow underfoot. Seeing that the six of them were making a track that a half-blind man could follow. Biggles thought it expedient, even though the tracks might soon be covered by fresh snow, to take to the forest. This slowed up the pace considerably, but in his opinion it was worth while. There was always a chance that the snow might stop again, and the tracks leading up the side of the estuary would tell their own story.

As for Ginger, he was getting really worried about the storm. Nothing was said, but he knew there could be no question of taking off in such conditions. If the snow persisted for any length of time they might not be able to get off when it stopped, for it was certain the aircraft would collect a considerable weight of it.

Biggles spoke to von Stalhein. 'You know better than I do how they conduct operations here,' he said. 'Do you think those troops will go on looking for us in this sort of weather?'

Von Stalhein answered that if the search was abandoned he thought guards would be posted at all strategic points, certainly near the fishing boats, and at the houses where the fugitives might try to obtain food.

'Thanks,' acknowledged Biggles. 'In that case we'd better not talk.'

It was as well they took the precaution of marching just inside the forest, for while they were still half a mile from the rendezvous they had a shock when a Cossack, travelling on the track, overtook them. What with the moaning of the wind in the trees, the lapping of waves on the shore, and the snow deadening the sound of the horse's hooves, they were unaware of his presence until he was level with them. Ginger caught a glimpse of the man bending low in the saddle as if to scan the ground more closely.

'We shall have to watch we don't bump into that fellow as he comes back,' remarked Biggles seriously, in a low voice.

'Don't forget Pat is somewhere in front of us,' reminded Ginger.

'He said he'd keep under cover, in the forest. If there is any shooting make sure you can see what you're shooting at, or we may find ourselves at loggerheads with Pat.'

They toiled on, winding a serpentine course through the trees but keeping close enough to the track to see anyone on it; particularly the rider who had gone forward, returning.

Biggles suddenly came to a dead stop as from somewhere ahead came the

sound of two shots fired in quick succession. Muffled by the storm it was not easy to judge how far away they were.

‘They were fired by two different weapons,’ said Biggles. ‘I don’t like that. I have a feeling someone fired at Pat and he fired back — or vice versa.’

They went on, and a minute later, a rider came down the track, presumably the one they had seen going forward. He rode at a hard canter, which was as fast as practicable in the weather conditions.

‘That fellow was riding as if he was in a hurry,’ said Biggles. ‘I’m afraid he’s seen something.’

‘He couldn’t have seen the aircraft, that’s certain,’ asserted Ginger. ‘I’d put visibility at not more than five or six yards.’

‘We may know more about it when we meet Pat,’ returned Biggles. ‘That is, if he is there to meet us.’

‘You mean—’

‘I don’t like those shots. He may have been hit. Come on.’

They resumed their journey in a state of uncertainty, pressing on against the storm, which showed no sign of abating. After a time Biggles said:

‘There’s only one thing to do in a case like this. If we go past the boat we might end up by losing ourselves completely.’ Raising his voice he shouted: ‘Pat.’ They waited. There was no answer. They went on perhaps fifty yards and Biggles called again. Still no answer.

‘If he was shot by that fellow we saw we shan’t find him by shouting,’ muttered Ginger, despondently.

Biggles did not reply. He strode on and again shouted: ‘Pat!’

To Ginger’s unspeakable relief a voice close at hand answered: ‘Okay. Here we are.’

A few more paces and they met.

‘We were just getting scared you’d had an affair with that horseman and got the worst of it,’ greeted Biggles.

‘He had a shot at me. He didn’t hit me, but he did something nearly as bad,’ said Pat savagely.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He hit the dinghy.’

For a second or two Ginger did not grasp the enormity of the disaster.

Biggles said: ‘How did it happen? I thought you were going to keep under cover.’

‘So I did until about twenty minutes ago,’ stated Pat. ‘Then, when I saw the snow beginning to pile up in drifts, it struck me that it might bury the dinghy, or fill her with so much snow that she’d be out of action. So like a fool I went out to have a look.’

‘A perfectly natural thing to do,’ put in Biggles.

‘Seeing she was already half full of snow, which was tilting her on one side, I started to chuck the goldarned stuff out; and by a bit of lousy luck it was right then that the guy on the horse came along. I didn’t hear a sound. I

looked up and there he was, watching me. I went for my gun. So did he. I missed him and he galloped off. I figured I was lucky he didn't hit me till I saw what he'd done. The dinghy had folded up like a pricked balloon. With the weight of snow in her she went under before I could do anything about it.'

'I can't see that you could have done anything about it, anyway. Where is she?'

Pat led the way to the spot and they saw the boat, a crumpled, shapeless mass, half in and half out of the water.

'I'm sorry,' said Pat.

'Nothing to be sorry about,' returned Biggles. 'It wasn't your fault. In your position I should have done the same as you did. It's just one of those things.'

'I've been trying to work out the best thing to do.'

'Forget it,' said Biggles. 'As far as the dinghy is concerned, she's finished. We've no means of repairing her, and if we had we couldn't inflate her.'

By this time Ginger had realized that they were cut off from the aircraft, and all that that implied. 'How are we going to let Algy know what's happened?' he asked.

Biggles answered. 'We can't. And it wouldn't help matters much if we could. I doubt if he could get the machine to us here in these conditions. In this wind, if he pulled the anchor in he'd be blown all over the place, and with visibility practically at zero once he lost sight of the rushes he wouldn't know where he was. It wouldn't matter so much if we could sit here and wait for this perishing blizzard to blow itself out, but we can't do that. Now we know why that Cossack was going home in a hurry.'

'He was going to fetch others,' put in Fritz.

'Of course. If he saw the dinghy, and I imagine he did, it won't be long before the prison authorities know where the trouble is coming from.'

Von Stalhein spoke, 'It sets a nice problem for you.'

'I've had worse,' returned Biggles.

'I can't see the answer to this one.'

'It's there, if we can find it,' retorted Biggles.

'How about me trying to get out to Algy?' suggested Pat.

'No use,' declined Biggles. 'You'd never find the machine in this blinding snow. The tide's in. It would mean swimming, and apart from the fact that the water is near freezing you can't swim in thick rushes. No. That won't do.'

'Algy will be getting worried,' said Ginger.

'Of course he will. But my orders were that he was to stay put, so things would have to be desperate before he tried to move. At present he has no real reason to move. He'll realize the danger of that as well as I do. Give me a minute to think.'

Silence fell.

After a little while Biggles went on. 'Fritz, I seem to remember you telling me, when you came back from your first reconnaissance, that Miskoff had a boat that he uses for fishing? I haven't seen it myself.'

‘Yes. That is right.’

‘That tub!’ exclaimed Ginger. ‘It looked a pretty flimsy home-made affair to me. It wouldn’t five for five minutes in any sort of sea. It’s a mile away. Even if by a miracle it kept afloat you’d never paddle it here in this wind.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of paddling it here,’ answered Biggles. ‘Is there any reason why it shouldn’t be carried here?’

‘No. I suppose not. Could we get it here in time? Troops are likely to arrive at any moment.’

‘Not necessarily. With the bridge gone and Miskoff sniping at them they may still be on the other side of the river. They won’t fancy taking to the water in this weather. That boat, if we could get it here, would give us a chance to get out to the machine even in these conditions, so we’d better take it. If this cockleshell is as flimsy as you say it is it shouldn’t take all of us to carry it. Someone will have to stay to mark the spot, anyhow. Pat, you’d better stay. You can stay with him, von Stalhein. After the strenuous day you’ve had on top of weeks of prison rations you must be exhausted.’

‘I am not in the least tired,’ said von Stalhein, curtly. ‘I would rather come with you and make myself useful. If nothing more I could cover your rear to make sure you are not overtaken. No one will pass me while I am on my feet.’

‘I can believe that,’ said Biggles. ‘All right. Let’s get cracking. Pat, while we’re away, as that dinghy is no more use to us try to get it out of sight under the water, or the snow; then, if that Cossack leads a party back here, there will be nothing to mark the spot, in which case he should have a job to find it. Don’t let us go past.’

‘How shall I know if it’s you?’

‘You’ll see us carrying the boat. If we don’t come back you must please yourself what you do. All I can suggest is that you stick around for the snow to stop and then try to get to Algy. Tell him what happened and make for Japan. That’s all. Let’s go.’

The five members of the party engaged in the forlorn hope set off up the track, with the wind now behind them making good time, travelling either at a run or a fast walk. Biggles led and von Stalhein brought up the rear. All carried their guns ready for use should they come into collision with troops marching in the opposite direction, as seemed to Ginger more than likely. He realized that with everything under snow the next difficulty would be to find the spot they sought, either the remains of Miskoff’s shack or the muddy patch at the water’s edge where he kept the boat. In this he was right, and more than once the party halted to argue about it. However, at the finish it was the clearing in which Miskoff’s house had stood that gave them the mark and they turned to the water.

The boat could not be seen. That was to be expected since the snow was several inches deep. But after they had tramped up and down for five minutes, stamping and kicking at humps and drifts, the bitter truth had to be faced. The boat was not there.

‘He must have moved it,’ said Fritz.

‘In which case we’re wasting our time,’ replied Biggles. ‘He might have put it anywhere.’

For a moment or two they lingered, loath to abandon the quest that could have meant so much. Then, as they turned to regain the track, their vigilance relaxed in their disappointment, a voice that belonged to none of their party came from somewhere just outside their snow-shortened range of vision.

‘It’s Miskoff,’ cried Fritz.

‘What does he say?’ asked Biggles.

‘He says what are we looking for?’

‘Tell him we were looking for his boat.’

Fritz complied.

The voice came again and this time its owner came with it. Miskoff loomed, axe on his belt, rifle in the crook of his arm.

This time it was von Stalhein who translated. ‘He has hidden the boat, but it is not far away. He thought we might be in trouble with the weather and was waiting here in case troops came down the track.’

‘Tell him we’ve lost our own boat, and ask him if we can borrow his,’ requested Biggles.

In another minute the matter was settled. Miskoff led them into the forest a short distance away and there lay the boat, with its single paddle, free from snow under the protecting trees. They took positions on either side of it, Miskoff helping, and lifting it without difficulty set off on the return journey. But this, with the wind and snow in their faces, and the wind dragging at the boat, was a different matter from the outward trip. However, they had the satisfaction of knowing that the snow was covering their tracks. Curiously, perhaps, far from Ginger being conscious of fatigue, he acquired a sense of exultation in this battle with the elements. That is not to say he was sorry when Pat’s voice informed them that they had reached their destination.

Miskoff’s boat was put on the water. It would only hold two, which really meant the transportation to the aircraft of one, since someone would have to bring it back. Several journeys would therefore be necessary. With the exception of von Stalhein all knew where the Otter was moored, so the order in which they went was not important.

Biggles detailed Fritz and Pat to go first. The one who stayed in the aircraft would be able to tell Algy what had happened and what they were doing. There was, they saw, little risk of the boat capsizing in the reeds, which here formed a belt sufficiently wide to break the force of waves which the wind must have blown up on the open water.

Pat and Fritz disappeared in the gloom. To Ginger it seemed a long time before Pat came back alone. On the next trip Pat took Bertie and Bertie brought the boat back. Bertie then took Ginger and Ginger brought the boat back to where Biggles and von Stalhein stood waiting, with Miskoff standing guard over the track behind them.

Ginger found himself marvelling at a situation that he could not have imagined — Biggles and von Stalhein not only standing together but working together to the same purpose. He heard Biggles say: 'Your turn, von Stalhein.'

Von Stalhein answered: 'No, you go next.'

Returned Biggles: 'I'm in charge here. I've given an order. Obey it. Get in the boat.'

Von Stalhein clicked his heels, bowed slightly, and with a curt '*Jawohl*' stepped into the boat.

'You come back for me, Ginger,' ordered Biggles. 'If von Stalhein brings it we're likely to stand here half the night, arguing.'

Not a word passed between them as Ginger took von Stalhein to the Otter. He put him aboard, and when he returned for Biggles he could hardly repress a smile as the humour of the situation struck him. The picture of Biggles and von Stalhein, two white-draped figures, standing together on a hostile shore, was nothing short of fantastic.

'I shall have to bring the boat back for Miskoff,' said Biggles, as he got in the little craft. 'I imagine he won't want to lose his boat, so after he's put me aboard it's all his. Once he's been out he'll know the way back to the shore. I imagine he'll hide the boat and take to the forest. If ever I saw a man able to take care of himself it's Miskoff. Not that he cares much whether he lives or dies.'

'You don't think he'd come away with us?' asked Ginger, as he paddled out to the Otter.

'No. He's already made it clear that he intends to stay here to bump off as many of his enemies as he can before they get him — as they will, at the finish, no doubt. What's the sea like?'

'It looked pretty rough from what I could see of it. The machine is feeling it a bit, but nothing serious.'

'I suppose she has plenty of snow on her.'

'She's pretty well smothered. I haven't been on the wings to see how deep it is, but I'm afraid it's a heavy load.'

'As long as it doesn't freeze we should be able to shift it when we can see what we're doing,' declared Biggles, confidently. 'This confounded storm can't last much longer. You might put a few cans of food out ready for Miskoff to take with him after he's finished with us. That's the least we can do for him.'

'I'll do that,' promised Ginger, as he stepped into the Otter.

Biggles pushed the little craft clear to make its last journey for them. It was soon back, with Miskoff handling it with the ease of long practice. Biggles climbed on to the hull, to see what things were like, as he told Ginger, who stood waiting. Miskoff took the cans of food with a grunt of thanks. Another minute and the most tragic figure Ginger had ever known was swallowed up, for the last time, in the gloom of the land that had broken his heart.

Biggles came into the cabin, snug with the warmth of human bodies and a

spirit stove boiling water for coffee.

‘They’ve told me what happened,’ said Algy. ‘What do you think of it outside?’

‘Not much,’ answered Biggles, dryly. ‘We’ve done what we came to do, so we’ve nothing to complain about; but it’s no use talking about getting off in this murk and with this sea running. There’s only one thing we can do now and that’s wait. I’ll have my own clothes back, Pat, if you don’t mind.’

Pat grinned. ‘Sure. I thought you’d soon have enough of that chain-gang outfit.’

Biggles turned to von Stalhein. ‘I think you want to say something to me. Now’s the time.’

CHAPTER 15

VON STALHEIN SAYS HIS PIECE

EVERYONE waited, eyes on von Stalhein.

‘I would like a straight answer to a simple question,’ he said.

‘Have I done anything to suggest that my answer wouldn’t be straight?’ inquired Biggles, evenly.

‘No.’

‘Then why bring that up? Having settled that, go ahead.’

‘What was behind your purpose in coming here on my behalf?’

‘That may be a simple question, but I find it a difficult one to answer in precise words. Is it important?’

‘Yes.’

‘In what way?’

‘Before I accept any more of your hospitality I would like to know the price I am expected to pay. I have my pride.’

‘Yes, and where did it get you?’ returned Biggles, bluntly. ‘It’s about time you realized that there are times when pride has to bow to common sense. I can’t recall saying anything that might imply that I expected payment for what I’m doing. On the contrary, I am at this moment doing my best to repay you for sending Fritz to warn me that certain of your associates had put me on the spot. Don’t imagine that I have forgotten that.’

‘Are you asking me to believe you took the appalling risk of coming here to rescue me simply out of — shall we say — sympathy, or affection?’

‘To you such a motive must appear strange,’ said Biggles, slowly. ‘Yet, strange though it may seem, it must have been something like that, or I wouldn’t have come here. I’m not acting under orders. There was no compulsion about this mission. You can believe that or not, as you like. I couldn’t care less.’

‘If you say that I believe you.’

‘That’s something, anyway,’ acknowledged Biggles, with a curious smile. ‘Let us put it like this. In the first place I appreciated the message you sent me through Fritz. We have a saying that one good turn deserves another. Secondly, Fritz’s high regard for you came into the picture. He was prepared to risk his life for you, and he nearly lost it by coming to me. Thirdly, I was shocked, but not surprised, by the injustice of your so-called trial, which was merely an excuse to dump you on Sakhalin for the rest of your days. I was hoping such a salutary lesson would have knocked that anti-British chip off your shoulder, but I’m afraid from your attitude now you are still running true to form.’

‘But if—’

‘Wait a minute,’ broke in Biggles. ‘I haven’t finished yet. While we’re at it

we'd better get everything tidied up. I'm going to be quite frank with you. Quite obviously I couldn't come here, using government equipment, on a purely personal matter. I had to get the authority of my chief, Air Commodore Raymond. It may be that he hopes you will be able to give him some useful information, but that has nothing to do with me. In my country we don't extract information by torture, so how much you say, or if you say anything at all, is entirely a matter for you to decide. Boiled down it all amounts to this: as soon as it's possible to get this machine off the water I shall make for England by the shortest route. I shall have to make stops to refuel. You may, if you wish, stay here, or you are at liberty to leave this aircraft at any port of call you wish on the way home. The alternative is that you come right through with me to England and stay there until you and Fritz have made up your minds what you're going to do. After what has happened neither of you can return to Eastern Germany without the probability of being shot or hanged. If you choose to come with me to England, as far as I, personally, am concerned, there are no strings attached. You are under no obligation to see my chief, although I hope you will, if only as a matter of courtesy. After all, you have him to thank for knocking off your shackles, although I did the actual work. That's all. I'm not going to argue. All I ask is that you make up your mind what you want to do and let me know your decision.'

'You realize that I have no money.'

'That's a detail that can be dealt with later.'

'Very well,' said von Stalhein. 'Since you put it like that I will come with you to England. I shall have time to think things over on the way there. At this moment I can only say thank you. Do not suppose that I'm not grateful to you for what you have done.'

'I am grateful, too,' put in Fritz.

'Let's leave the bouquets until we get home,' suggested Biggles, smiling faintly. 'We're not there yet.' He looked at von Stalhein. 'I shall expect you to prove your gratitude by refraining from working against us in the future.'

'That remark was quite unnecessary,' stated von Stalhein. 'Your opinion of me may not be very high, but I would hardly be as base as that. Incidentally, aren't you afraid that your raid here will start a political rumpus?'

'If we get home no one will know we've been here.'

'But you couldn't hope to leave here in daylight without someone seeing you.'

'Seeing what? The aircraft? This machine is an obsolete type. It's of orthodox standard design and might belong to anyone.'

'What about its nationality registration letters?'

'You haven't had a chance to see them yet. When you do you may realize they won't tell anybody anything. You don't think I'd be such a fool as to come here wearing British nationality markings?'

'What are your markings?'

'S.K.'

‘What country do they represent?’

‘As far as I’m aware, no country at all. That’s why I put them up.’

Von Stalhein stared. ‘You think of everything.’

‘I wish I could,’ murmured Biggles. ‘But that’s a bit too much to expect. Still, I do rattle my brain-pan trying to think of little things that might save me trouble. Now let’s see about snatching some sleep. We have a long way to go.’

The rest of the night passed uncomfortably, the aircraft straining and sometimes jerking at its anchor. Wavelets slapping against the keel and the incessant rasp and rustle of the rushes drowned all other sounds. As a result, sleep for most of those in the now crowded cabin was taken in snatches, and Ginger for one was glad when dawn came to put an end to this state of affairs and give him an excuse to move. He went outside to see what was happening.

It had stopped snowing and the air felt a little warmer. Breaks in the clouds through which a watery sun flashed fitfully, and a falling wind, showed that the storm was at last blowing itself out. Waterfowl which had found refuge in the reeds began to appear. Turning to the track, there was no one on it as far as he could see. Snow sliding from the overlaid branches of the firs demonstrated that a thaw had set in.

Biggles appeared. Looking at the water critically he said: ‘There’s still a bit of a swell running, but an hour or so should see it down far enough for us to take off. We shall need all that time to get rid of most of this confounded snow. We’d better cut a gap through those reeds in front of us, too, to give us a clear run. Call the others to lend a hand. Fritz can watch the track. Troops will be along presently, no doubt, to see what that fuss last night was about.’

For about an hour, with everyone hard at work, all went well. Most of the snow, now soft and slushy, had been cleared from the wings, hull and tail unit. The fringe of rushes that had hidden the Otter from the seaward side had been thinned and Biggles went to the cockpit to start the engines, to give them a chance to warm up. In this he had a little difficulty, for they were of course stone cold; but after some anxious minutes and several failures first one and then the other came to life. He did not run them up to confirm they were giving their full revs for fear the volume of sound this would make would hasten unwelcome visitors to the spot. There would be time for that when they were ready to leave, he remarked. So after leaving them ticking over for some ten minutes he switched off again and joined Ginger on the hull.

It was at this juncture that the patrol boat reappeared round the point of land on the far side of the estuary where they had last seen it, and it was clear from the white bow-wave it was making that it was travelling at speed.

‘They haven’t seen us yet; they’re heading towards where Miskoff’s shack used to be,’ observed Biggles, after watching the boat for a minute.

‘With the reeds gone they’re bound to see us if they look this way,’ returned Ginger.

‘They may not. If they don’t, so much the better. We can take our time,’

answered Biggles.

‘Does it matter if they see us? We’d still have time to get off.’

‘It might matter a lot. Don’t forget that boat is equipped with radio, and before we could get into the air it would be buzzing. I don’t know how far away the nearest enemy aircraft are, but there may be some too close to be healthy.’

‘They’ve seen us!’ cried Ginger. ‘They’re turning.’

‘Okay,’ snapped Biggles. ‘Let’s get weaving.’

They hastened to the control cabin. The others, who had either seen or heard what was happening, were already in their places.

‘Sit tight,’ Biggles called to them in passing. ‘We may bump a bit.’

In fact, the take-off was more than a bit bumpy, for the open water was rougher than it had appeared to be from the shelter of the rushes, and the Otter, robust though she was, made heavy weather of it. There were some nasty moments before she ‘unstuck’, and it was a wave that finally kicked her into the air; but once off there was no more trouble, and it was with a wan smile of relief that Biggles banked steeply away from the danger area. He made no attempt to climb, but held the machine down nearly on the water as he raced for the open sea. As soon as he was clear of the estuary, still keeping low, he took up his course for Japan.

‘You watch the sky,’ he told Ginger.

‘You’re not grabbing any altitude?’

‘No. We’ve less chance of being seen down here.’

Ten minutes later the island was a great black mass behind them. In a few more minutes their objective showed as a faint smudge on the southern horizon.

‘Bandits!’ called Ginger, suddenly.

‘Where are they?’

‘Dead astern at about five thousand.’

‘How many?’

‘Three.’

‘What are they?’

‘They look like Migs.’

‘We should just about do it,’ said Biggles, his eyes on the land ahead, hardening with every passing minute. ‘They won’t dare to follow us over Japan. Tell Algy to make a radio signal to Colonel Bradfield. Say we have Pat on board. Give our position and say we are being pursued by three Migs.’

‘Okay.’ Ginger hurried aft.

In the end it was touch and go. The enemy fighters, with the advantage of speed and height, overhauled the Otter rapidly, and were nearly in range when three Sabre jets appeared, coming from the opposite direction. The Migs, now over Japanese territorial waters, saw them at once, and turned away. The Sabres did not follow them, but buzzing the Otter as they flashed past led the way over the coast.

With that, danger was a thing of the past. Biggles throttled back to cruising speed, which he maintained until, lowering his wheels, he landed to find Colonel Bradfield, and some pilots of Pat's squadron waiting for them.

Pat's appearance in his prison suit was greeted with cries of banter and derision in the traditional manner of pilots everywhere who thus seek to hide their real emotions when a friend, feared lost, returns.

'My — my,' said Colonel Bradfield, looking at them, as one by one they stepped down. 'You boys sure look as if you could do with a clean-up. Come along to my headquarters and while you're having a bath I'll get a meal fixed for you. When you're feeling more comfortable you can tell me all about it. Who's this other fellow in a striped suit?' he went on, looking at von Stalhein. 'Is he the man you went to fetch?'

'He's the one.'

'Smart work. I'm sure glad you helped Manton to escape.'

'We didn't,' returned Biggles. 'He did that on his own, in a way that deserves full marks. We merely gave him a lift home. No doubt he'll tell you about it presently.'

'Then let's get on with it,' said the Colonel. 'This way.'

Three weeks later the Otter arrived in England to touch down on its home airport with its crew looking none the worse for their perilous adventure. Von Stalhein, in a new suit bought in Tokyo to replace the prison outfit, was more like the man they had known for so long.

He looked about him curiously as with the others he walked into the Air Police Operational Headquarters. 'So this is where it all starts from,' he murmured. 'I never expected to find myself here.'

'I can imagine that, but life is full of surprises,' said Biggles, casually. 'Have you made up your mind what you're going to do? As I told you, you are free to go where you like as far as I'm concerned. I can let you have some money to go on with. You'll need a new cigarette holder and a monocle, anyway. You wouldn't be the same without them.'

Von Stalhein managed to smile. 'First I shall have to find lodgings for Fritz and myself.'

'Fair enough. My car will take you into London. Let us know where you're staying.'

'You want to see us again?'

'That's entirely up to you. I think you should see my chief if only to say thank you.'

'If you wish it I will.'

'Good. Incidentally, he may find a way of getting Fritz's mother out of East Berlin to our side of the border. Obviously, things being as they are, Fritz would be crazy to go back to her. Her house will be watched for both of you. I'd hate to hear you'd been sent back to Sakhalin after all the bother I've had getting you out.'

‘You need have no fear of that,’ declared von Stalhein. ‘I mustn’t take up any more of your time, but before I go I must thank you for—’

Biggles brushed the thought aside. ‘Don’t speak of thanks. After all, my country and yours have buried the hatchet, I hope for good. We’ll see if we can do better as allies. I can’t say our trip to Sakhalin was exactly a pleasure, but for some time I’ve had an idea things might turn out this way. Good-bye for now.’ He held out a hand.

Von Stalhein took it. For a moment he looked Biggles squarely in the eyes. ‘It is a pity we didn’t reach this understanding earlier,’ he said quietly, and had turned to the others when the door opened and Air Commodore Raymond walked in.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he said. ‘I got your signal to say you were on the way and hoped to be here when you arrived, but I had to fix things with customs and the immigration people and that took a little time. Did you have a good trip?’

‘Not too bad, sir,’ answered Biggles. ‘Anyhow, we’re all here.’

‘So I see.’ The Air Commodore turned to von Stalhein. ‘It’s some time since we met. I think you will find things less uncomfortable here than in Sakhalin. Here are your registration papers. Where are you going now?’

Von Stalhein hesitated.

‘He was just going off to look for digs, sir,’ explained Biggles.

‘I was hoping he’d join me for lunch.’ The Air Commodore smiled at von Stalhein, who was looking somewhat embarrassed by this offer of hospitality. ‘Does the idea appeal to you?’

‘Er — thank you. I am happy to accept.’

‘Capital. My car’s outside.’

As they walked to the door the Air Commodore threw a mysterious smile over his shoulder to Biggles. ‘I’ll see the rest of you later,’ he said, and followed von Stalhein out.

As the door closed behind him a curious silence fell on the room. It lasted for some seconds. Then it was Bertie who spoke.

‘Well, blow me down!’ he breathed. ‘Will wonders never end?’

‘Probably not,’ answered Biggles. ‘Life would be a dull business if they did. Let’s go over to the restaurant and tear a steak before we start the tidying up.’

THE END